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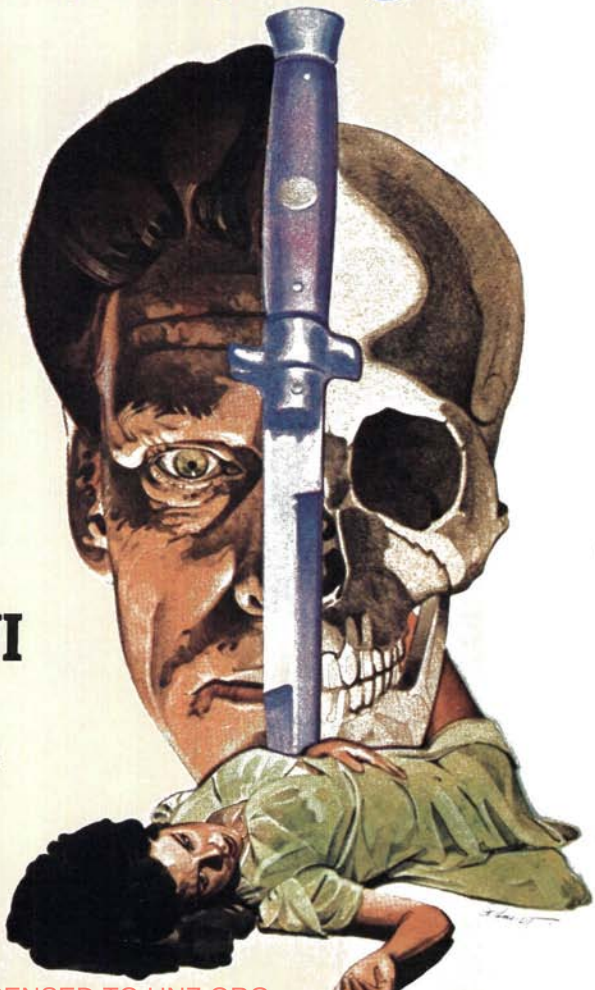

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The World's Leading Mystery Magazine

ELLERY QUEEN'S
Mystery Magazine

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PRESIDENT & PUBLISHER: *Joel Davis* EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: *Ellery Queen*

Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Vol. 68, No. 6, Whole No. 397, DEC., 1976. Published monthly by Davis Publications, Inc., at $1.00 a copy. Annual subscription $14.00 in U.S.A., $15.20 in U.S. possessions and Canada; $16.40 in the Pan American Union and in all other countries. Editorial and Executive Offices. 229 Park Avenue South, New York, N.Y. 10003. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 2600, Greenwich, Ct. 06830. Second-class postage paid at N.Y., N.Y., and additional mailing offices. *© 1976 by Davis Publications, Inc., all rights reserved. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention and the Pan American Copyright Convention. Printed in U.S.A. Submission must be accompanied by stamped self-addressed envelope, the Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts.*

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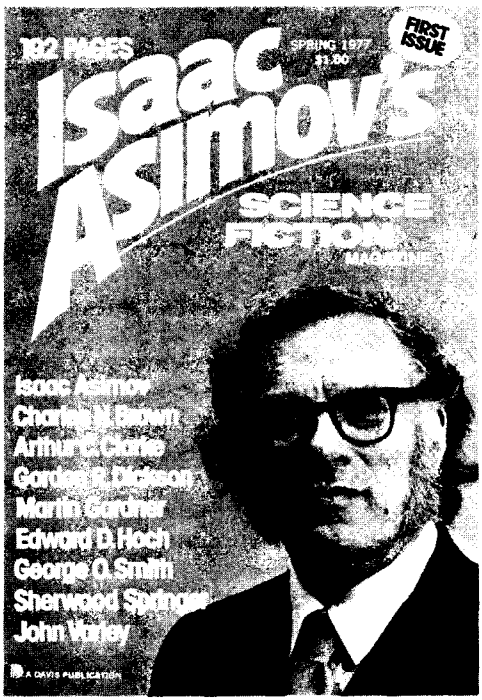

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a *NEW* short story by

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NOVEMBER STORY

by BARBARA CALLAHAN

For a long time I've been searching for a ladder out of limbo. I always knew a ladder would be necessary because as a child I visualized limbo as a deep shaft bounded on four sides by concrete. There was no lid on limbo, no covering to block out the view of the sky or of the people who skipped over the opening on their way to joys and sorrows.

In limbo there are no joys or sorrows. There is only a numbness, as if each soul lowered into the shaft, existing somewhere between heaven and hell, had been novocained before being dispatched there. I am always asked how I manage to sit so still and stare so intently when I am onstage where my husband, Senator Flip Morley, is delivering a speech I've heard at least a hundred times. It's easy, I tell a reporter or the frightened wife of a young man newly lighting the political horizon; my husband is the most brilliant man I've ever met. His words never fail to mesmerize me.

His words mesmerize me into limbo. I sit on the stage and I can't move because four concrete gray walls have been dropped around my chair. There's a portable limbo that follows me wherever I go. I stare intently because I am hoping that a ladder will appear on one of the walls and that I will become sufficiently unanesthetized to grab at it, and pull myself up and out of my concrete pit.

Once I almost caught the ladder. Before sitting down on a chair,

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I bumped my ankle against a hard metal rung. The pain, unwelcome to most, animated me. For a moment I was a live, feeling human being. I even experienced tears stinging my eyes. I was so alive that I heard an official who was of the same party as my husband introduce Flip Morley as the "Man who will save us all, the man who will be the next President of the United States."

His words were the signal for all the faithful gathered in the audience to leap to their feet and shriek, "Flip! Flip! Flip!" As I sat there, blinking away the tears of pain, I saw a ladder. It wasn't distinct. It was wavy and insubstantial, but it would have to do. I lunged for it. It felt cold in my hand. One side of it had slipped away. I blinked again and saw that I was gripping a microphone. I had come too far to let go, and I heard myself saying, "If he is the man to save us, God save us all."

A hand thrust itself over mine. Once again I felt pain. The hand belonged to the former champion discus thrower and current champion senator from Pennsylvania, Flip Morley. "I'm sure you didn't hear what my wife said because of all the noise. Please permit an unsolicited testimonial from an unbiased voter who couldn't contain her enthusiasm. Please be quiet." The crowd laughed delightedly and then settled down. Crowds have always responded obediently, in fact almost reverently, to Flip.

The hand that threw the discus was about to rule the world and that hand never left mine as I spoke clearly into the microphone. "If you look to any other man to save us, then God save us all." The crowd roared, a high-school band crashed into *The Pennsylvania Polka*, and Flip kissed me on the cheek, a kiss that was forever frozen into a wire-service photo that flashed around the world.

The next day's headlines on the Women's Pages read, "Liz Morley Checks into Arizona Beauty Spa." A lie. A person looking very much like me checked into an Arizona Beauty Spa, courtesy of party funds. "Mrs. Morley wants to lose eight pounds before purchasing a chic campaign wardrobe," bubbled the article.

"Take your medicine like a good girl," bubbled the nurse in the sanatorium in Upper New York State where I was driven immediately after I had grabbed at the elusive ladder.

After three days I was allowed busywork, not basket weaving or moccasin sewing like the other Limbo Ladies who swished by my room in shrouds of high-priced bathrobes. My therapy had to be solitary lest a drug-fogged brain in a moment of lucidity recognize

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the wife of the strongest contender for the presidency. My husband's secretary, my only visitor, brought me a manila envelope. Briskly she opened it and told me to get to work. She loathes me and loves my husband. I am the fly in her ointment. I am the fly that must be swatted every so often in its erratic flight to the White House. She has her eye on a desk in a room next to the Oval Office, just as I have my eye on a ladder which must exist somewhere.

"Liz Morley's Handbook for Political Wives" read the first page in the envelope. "A Lady in every sense of the word," read page two, "a Lady whose grace, charm, and loyalty have assisted her husband in his twenty-two-year ascent to the leadership of our party." The lovely blurb came from Bert Dooley, a raucous political figure whose acquaintance with ladies was limited to those of the night.

The handbook came as an order from Dooley headquarters. "Get your wife to write a book for some of those broads who're coming on the scene with their husbands. Loud-mouthed radical bunch who'll say whatever pops into their heads. And their clothes! One of those dolls came to a rally dressed in jeans—jeans, for Pete's sake!"

I skimmed through the pages, stopping to smile at the chapter on "How to Sit, Smile, and Speak Correctly Onstage." "Don't go looking for ladders, they're really microphones," I penciled in at the top of the page. Then I dropped the 62 pages into a wastebasket. My husband's secretary has a carbon copy. In fact, she is a carbon copy. Of me. She read my book before I wrote it. Since she was surpassing me in lady-ness, she could finish it.

When I arrived home, the chic campaign wardrobe was waiting for me, along with a reporter from *Lib Magazine*. She had been given permission by my husband and his staff of advisors to stay with me for a day and a half to gather material for an article. The Morley think-tank was delighted that a feminist magazine thought me worthy of attention. Before meeting the reporter I was briefed by my husband's secretary.

"This is a unique opportunity for Flip Morley to enter into the consciousness of those women's libbers. They're too chauvinistic to interview him, so you'll have to get him across to their readers. Don't let him down. He's very concerned about you."

"So concerned," I answered, "that he sent me a vase of flowers with a beautiful card signed by you."

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"He's busy, you know," she snapped.

"Of course," I said. "With you."

Flashing me a murderous glance, she admitted the reporter. Her name was Molly Schwenker. She was about 28 years old. She had red hair, freckles, an excess of twenty pounds, and spots on her pants suit. She carried a tape recorder in a shoulder bag. Endowed with a strong sense of integrity, she announced, whenever she pressed a button on the machine, "This is for the record, Mrs. Morley."

Our first venture together was to an outing for handicapped children. The Morley team arranged many such appearances for me. Since Flip and I were childless, I had to be seen as often as possible with children. The image to be projected was that of Mrs. Earth, mother of all, rather than mother of none. Our only child had been stillborn.

"This is for the record, Mrs. Morley. Do you really like these visits with kids?" Molly asked after I had been photographed sitting on a motionless carousel horse with a three-year-old boy on my lap.

"I love them," I answered fiercely. "Why do you ask?"

"Because you look so sad when you see them, except when you're being photographed. Then you beam like a movie star. Afterward you hand them right back to their mothers."

We were walking along the fairgrounds, hurrying to keep on schedule so that we could be seen with all the age groups and with all the personnel who cared for them. The bright cotton-candy day suddenly became colorless. I saw a gray Ferris wheel, a gray hot-dog stand, and a gray funhouse. The walls of the funhouse advanced toward me until they enclosed me in their grayness. I didn't have to reach out to know that the walls were made of concrete. I was standing in limbo, in familiar limbo.

A whirring noise invaded my limbo. It came from Molly's tape recorder.

"That question is off the record, Mrs. Morley. I erased it."

She pulled at my arm and led me to a bench.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I did do my homework. I just forgot that you lost your only child. Forgive me."

A face as pretty and vivacious as Molly's should not look pained. I smiled at her and squeezed her hand. The grayness faded from her face and from the fairgrounds.

"Just ask me about my husband and we'll do fine," I told her.

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"It's a deal," she promised, and turned on the tape recorder.

For the record I told her about Flip, the star athlete, president of his class, and Phi Beta Kappa, courting me. I told her about our marriage in an army chapel in Georgia. I told her about our neophyte political days when we drove through the gorgeous Pennsylvania countryside in an old jeep, a laughing loving couple on more of a lark than on an earnest foray into the battlefield of politics. When Flip unseated the incumbent in the state legislature, the lark ended.

As I related the story of our early days in Washington, I noticed that Molly hadn't once turned off the tape recorder. Apparently my recitation, polished to perfection from years of performance, enchanted her. She was a thrilled listener to a monologue that I had delivered many times. She believed that the actress loved her lines. An actress, poor Molly, can do a beautiful job even in a role she hates.

When I finished, Molly sighed. "I know we at *Lib Magazine* aren't supposed to be turned on by romantic stories, but I am. You must love your husband so much, Mrs. Morley, that you would die for him."

"I did die for him," I responded. "I went to limbo."

The whirring noise returned. "I'll erase that, Mrs. Morley," Molly said. "That's off the record."

"Thank you," I said.

As we drove back to my home in Virginia, I almost reached into Molly's bag to take the recorder. I wanted to pick up the little microphone and tell it many things. Off-the-record things. Like the night I waited and waited for Flip to come home from a rally so he could drive me to the hospital to have the baby. I needed him badly at that time. When he didn't come, I called a cab. The baby who had needed expert care was delivered in the emergency room by an intern who was plainly scared.

The first gray stone of limbo descended. Whenever I tried to get out of bed to look through the window at the azaleas in our yard, the beautiful flowers were blocked by the image of a gray concrete stone that bore the name of our child. The stone grew larger and larger until it became a wall.

After the baby's death, while I lay wrapped tightly in a quilt of depression, a quilt too heavy to push away, Flip sat with me and read to me. Then as the weeks slipped into a month, his bedside visits became less frequent. A young senator on the rise had to

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be seen in the right places with the right people.

"Where to tonight, Mrs. Morley?" Molly asked.

"A cocktail party at the State Department," I answered.

Molly didn't bring the tape recorder to the cocktail party. "Too many background noises," she told me. I enjoyed watching her balance a martini glass while nibbling on a miniature quiche Lorraine. I laughed aloud when she shook hands with a distinguished-looking gentleman who walked away from her wiping bits of pie crust from his fingers. Some of the cotton-candy day drifted into the evening until I saw Greta Ferguson.

Greta walked by me without speaking. She hasn't spoken to me since Flip assumed the chairmanship of the committee her husband used to head.

Although her husband had ostensibly resigned because of ill health, Greta and I knew the real reason. Flip had assembled enough damaging information on Senator Ferguson to send him to prison. In exchange for the chairmanship, Flip promised to destroy all the data. He didn't. On the day Flip, as an unnamed source, released the evidence to the press, Senator Ferguson jumped to his death from the twentieth floor of his gray apartment building.

When I went to pay a condolence visit to Mrs. Ferguson, she told me everything. The gray wall of the Ferguson's apartment building became the second wall of my limbo.

After the cocktail party Flip flew to Indianapolis. I insisted that Molly spend the night at our house. We sat at the kitchen table and sipped hot chocolate. Molly did a humorous, nonstop commentary on the people she had met at the party. I squealed with laughter at her recital. The tape recorder stayed inside her shoulder bag. Nothing was on the record. That night I slept without help from pills. Laughter had loosened all my tight muscles.

In the morning Molly accompanied me to a breakfast for senators' wives. Her dexterity with a Danish equaled her finesse with a miniature quiche Lorraine. Her comments about the breakfast centered on Lisa Van Ecklin, the wife of the senator from New York. "Did you see those jewels she was wearing, and to breakfast yet?" she squeaked. "She must have worn a quarter of a million dollars' worth of jewels."

"They're imitations," I told her.

"Are you a connoisseur of jewels?" she asked.

"Only of her jewels."

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The real Van Ecklin jewels lay coldly glittering in a safe-deposit box. Our safe-deposit box. I saw them when I went to the bank to secure documents I needed for a trip. When I asked Flip about them, he shrugged and said, "Call them a little insurance for our old age. Van Ecklin's kid is in jail in Mexico for possession of narcotics. The story the esteemed senator from New York gives out is that the kid is on an archeological expedition. The only digging Junior will do, if he's lucky, is tunneling. I got the information from a reporter who owed me a favor. When I confronted Van Ecklin with the scoop, he literally shoved the jewels in my pocket."

The gray door of a bank vault became the third wall of my limbo.

After the breakfast Molly had to catch a plane. I volunteered my driver for the trip to the airport. On the way she said, "You've been very kind, Mrs. Morley, so kind that I have a confession to make. *Lib Magazine* wanted me to do a scathing article about you as a plastic person. They consider you the epitome of passive womanhood, of the woman who rode to fame on her husband's coattails. I can't write about you that way. I see you as a person who formed a partnership and worked actively to keep that partnership alive. You've participated in the electoral process by sacrificing everything to help your husband, a fine man, get to the top. I'm not going to knock that. I'm going to write an article based on the talk we had at the fairgrounds. Nothing else is going into the article. I think you're a beautiful person, Mrs. Morley, but you're very sad. Your sadness is a mystery to me and it's strictly your business. It's no material for an article."

Deeply touched by her remarks, I felt the same kind of stinging in my eyes that I had experienced when my ankle bumped the metal chair—alive once more.

"Your editors aren't going to like that, Molly."

"There are other jobs," she answered.

"What would keep you in your job?" I asked.

"A scoop. Some kind of fantastic scoop. I'd have it made for the rest of my life."

"When you land tonight, wish on a star. Maybe you'll get your scoop."

As I watched her board the plane, I had a sense of loss. I focused on the plane until I could see nothing but the grayness of the November sky.

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Driving home, the image of the colorless sky stayed with me. I tried to hold onto the image of Molly's rust-colored freckles and her green eyes, but my mind continued to gravitate toward the absence of color, to the sky.

I remembered standing at a window and looking out at a gray sky for signs of salvation when Flip told me we would not be receiving any more letters from a stewardess who wrote us threatening to expose Flip's affair with her. I could not take my eyes off that gray sky because I had just finished reading a newspaper account of the strangulation of a twenty-five-year-old airline stewardess, the apparent victim of a robbery-slaying.

"She's taking a job overseas," he said. "We'll never hear from her again."

When the hand of the discus thrower touched my shoulder as a prelude to a kiss, I stood rigid, never lifting my eyes from the gray slab of sky formed by my window.

The slab of gray sky became the fourth wall of my limbo. I was sealed inside.

There is not only an absence of color in limbo but also an absence of feeling. It's like being in a full-length cast with only one's head poking out. The head sticks out because there is no lid on limbo. Anyone can look down into limbo. But until Molly came, no one ever did.

When I got home from the airport, I went into Flip's study and sat for a long time in his leather armchair. Dozing, I saw Molly leaning over a concrete shaft. She had something in her hand, something she was unwinding. She lowered it slowly down to me. I reached for it and found that it was tape from a tape recorder. As I grabbed hold of it, Molly pulled me up out of limbo.

When I awoke I realized I had been searching for the wrong thing. It wasn't a ladder that would lift me out of limbo; it was a tape recorder. Flip had a recorder in his desk. I took it out of the drawer. I pressed a button and said, "This is Liz Morley and everything I say on this tape is for the record, Molly. You must have wished on a star tonight because here is your scoop."

The first gray wall, the grave marker, did not go on the tape. I helped construct that wall myself. I should have known that Flip would not leave a rally because I had called. His eye was on the political prize, not on me. I should have known that.

But I did tell the little machine about Senator Ferguson. "Flip Morley was the unnamed source who released the damaging in-

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formation that sent Senator Ferguson plummeting to his death."

And I told the machine about the jewels in our safe-deposit box, without saying who gave them to Flip. And I told the machine who had ordered the strangling of the airline stewardess a few years ago. As I spoke, my voice became a trumpet and the gray walls came tumbling down.

When I finished making the tape, I put it in a box and wrapped it in brown paper. I addressed it to Molly in care of *Lib Magazine*. It was four o'clock, an hour before the post office closed. I slipped into my coat and hurried downstairs. I wanted to walk to the post office so that I could look at people on the street without the hindrance of the gray cataracts that had clouded my vision for so long.

The first person I saw as I walked down the front steps was Flip. He had stepped out of a cab. I dropped the small package and it bounced crookedly toward his feet. He picked it up and turned it over in his hand.

"What's this?"

"A tape that Molly the reporter from *Lib Magazine* made. She left it here," I lied. "I'm going to mail it to her."

"I hope there's nothing in it that would offend the party," he said.

"Nothing at all," I said.

"Good girl," he said and leaned down to kiss me. As his head neared mine, I noticed the lines of fatigue etched in his face.

"Don't be long," Flip called as I started down the street. "I'm giving a speech tonight."

"I won't be long," I answered.

The people on the street looked so colorful to me. I noticed the ruddiness of their cheeks and the brightness of their eyes. Then for some reason I stopped looking at the women and looked only at the men. And all the men had Flip's face. One man had Flip's face contorted with pain—the pain of my betrayal. Another man had Flip's face twisted with hatred—hatred of me. Still another had Flip's face consumed with despair—the despair at ever being a free man again. Each of the men looked to me as Flip would look when he read Molly's scoop in print.

I had to get away from those faces. Those faces were doing something to me. They were creating a sensation in me that I hadn't experienced for years. Those faces were causing me pain. I was feeling a desperate kind of pain, Flip's future pain.

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Holding tightly to the package in my pocket, I started to run. When I reached the post office, I stood outside, breathless, hoping that I could rid myself of the pain as easily as I could rid myself of the box. But I knew that if I mailed the box the pain would never leave me.

In limbo there are no pleasures, but there are also no pains. I put the box into my pocket and walked away from the post office. I walked for a long while until I reached the river. I stood on a bridge and dropped the little package into the river's gray swirling currents. At that moment I knew I had put a lid on my limbo, a fluid gray lid that would ebb and flow over me as long as I lived. No one would ever peer down into the shaft at me again.

That night Flip received a standing ovation for his speech. Then the M.C. worked the audience into a sustained frenzy of whistling and applause. After the tumult subsided, the M.C. wouldn't quit. He solicited more acclaim for his speaker. "Let's hear it for Flip Morley. Let's hear it for the senator from Pennsylvania. Let's hear it for the next President of the United States!" he shouted.

The noise of the crowd was so deafening that I could barely hear a small voice that seemed to be speaking under water, a voice that seemed to be saying, "Let's hear it for limbo."

"Q"

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SWEET FEVER

by BILL PRONZINI

Quarter before midnight, like on every evening except the Sabbath or when it's storming or when my rheumatism gets to paining too bad, me and Billy Bob went down to the Chigger Mountain railroad tunnel to wait for the night freight from St. Louis. This here was a fine summer evening, with a big old fat yellow moon hung above the pines on Hankers Ridge and mockingbirds and cicadas and toads making a soft ruckus. Nights like this, I have me a good feeling, and I know Billy Bob does too.

They's a bog hollow on the near side of the tunnel opening, and beside it a woody slope, not too steep. Halfway down the slope is a big catalpa tree and that was where we always set, side by side with our backs up against the trunk.

So we come on down to there, me hobbling some with my cane and Billy Bob holding onto my arm. That moon was so bright you could see the melons lying in Ferdie Johnson's patch over on the left, and the rail tracks had a sleek oiled look coming out of the tunnel mouth and leading off towards the Sabreville yards a mile up the line. On the far side of the tracks, the woods and the run-down shacks that used to be a hobo jungle before the county sheriff closed it off thirty years back had them a silvery cast, like they was all coated in winter frost.

We set down under the catalpa tree and I leaned my head back to catch my wind. Billy Bob said, "Granpa, you feeling right?"

"Fine, boy."

"Rheumatism ain't started paining you?"

"Not a bit."

He give me a grin. "Got a little surprise for you."

"The hell you do."

"Fresh plug of blackstrap," he said. He come out of his pocket with it. "Mr. Cotter got him in a shipment just today down at his store."

I was some pleased. But I said, "Now you hadn't ought to go spending your money on me, Billy Bob."

"Got nobody else I'd rather spend it on."

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I took the plug and unwrapped it and had me a chew. Old man like me ain't got many pleasures left, but fresh blackstrap's one; good corn's another. Billy Bob gets us all the corn we need from Ben Logan's boys. They got a pretty good-sized still up on Hankers Ridge, and their corn is the best in this part of the hills. Not that either of us is a drinking man, now. A little touch after supper and on special days is all. I never did hold with drinking too much, or doing anything too much, and I taught Billy Bob the same.

He's a good boy. Man couldn't ask for a better grandson. But I raised him that way—in my own image, you might say—after both my own son Rufus and Billy Bob's ma got taken from us in 1947. I reckon I done a right job of it, and I couldn't be less proud of him than I was of his pa, or love him no less either.

Well, we set there and I worked on the chew of blackstrap and had a spit every now and then, and neither of us said much. Pretty soon the first whistle come, way off on the other side of Chigger Mountain. Billy Bob cocked his head and said, "She's right on schedule."

"Mostly is," I said, "this time of year."

That sad lonesome hungry ache started up in me again—what my daddy used to call the "sweet fever." He was a railroad man, and I grew up around trains and spent a goodly part of my early years at the roundhouse in the Sabreville yards. Once, when I was ten, he let me take the throttle of the big 2-8-0 Mogul steam locomotive on his highballing run to Eulalia, and I can't recollect no more finer experience in my whole life.

Later on I worked as a callboy, and then as a fireman on a 2-10-4, and put in some time as a yard-tender engineer, and I expect I'd have gone on in railroading if it hadn't been for the Depression and getting myself married and having Rufus. My daddy's short-line company folded up in 1931, and half a dozen others too, and wasn't no work for either of us in Sabreville or Eulalia or anywheres else on the iron.

That squeezed the will right out of my daddy, and he took to ailing, and I had to accept a job on Mr. John Barnett's truck farm to support him and the rest of my family. Was my intention to go back into railroading, but the Depression dragged on, and my daddy died, and a year later my wife Amanda took sick and passed on, and by the time the war come it was just too late.

But my son Rufus got him the sweet fever too, and took a

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switchman's job in the Sabreville yards, and worked there right up until the night he died. Billy Bob was only three then; his own sweet fever comes most purely from me and what I taught him. Ain't no doubt trains been a major part of all our lives, good and bad, and ain't no doubt neither they get into a man's blood and maybe change him, too, in one way and another. I reckon they do.

The whistle come again, closer now, and I judged the St. Louis freight was just about to enter the tunnel on the other side of the mountain. You could hear the big wheels singing on the track, and if you listened close you could just about hear the banging of couplings and the hiss of air brakes as the engineer throttled down for the curve. The tunnel don't run straight through Chigger Mountain; she comes in from the north and angles to the east, so that a big freight like the St. Louis got to cut back to quarter speed coming through.

When she entered the tunnel, the tracks down below seemed to shimmy and you could feel the vibration clear up where we was sitting under the catalpa tree. Billy Bob stood himself up and peered down towards the black tunnel mouth like a bird dog on a point. The whistle come again, and once more, from inside the tunnel, sounding hollow and miseried now. Every time I heard it like that, I thought of a body trapped and hurting and crying out for help that wouldn't come in the empty hours of the night. I shifted the cud of blackstrap and worked up a spit to keep my mouth from drying. The sweet fever feeling was strong in my stomach.

The blackness around the tunnel opening commenced to lighten, and got brighter and brighter until the long white glow from the locomotive's headlamp spilled out onto the tracks beyond. Then she come through into my sight, her light shining like a giant's eye, and the engineer give another tug on the whistle, and the sound of her was a clattering rumble as loud to my ears as a mountain rockslide. But she wasn't moving fast, just kind of easing along, pulling herself out of that tunnel like a night crawler out of a mound of earth.

The locomotive clacked on past, and me and Billy Bob watched her string slide along in front of us. Flats, boxcars, three tankers in a row, more flats loaded down with pine logs big around as a privy, a refrigerator car, five coal gondolas, another link of boxcars. Fifty in the string already, I thought. She won't be dragging more than sixty, sixty-five.

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Billy Bob said suddenly, "Granpa, look yonder!"

He had his arm up, pointing. My eyes ain't so good no more and it took me a couple of seconds to follow his point, over on our left and down at the door of the third boxcar in the last link. It was sliding open, and clear in the moonlight I saw a man's head come out, then his shoulders.

"It's a floater, Granpa," Billy Bob said, excited. "He's gonna jump. Look at him holding there, he's gonna jump."

I spit into the grass. "Help me up, boy."

He got a hand under my arm and lifted me up and held me until I was steady on my cane. Down there at the door of the boxcar, the floater was looking both ways along the string of cars and down at the ground beside the tracks. That ground was soft loam and the train was going slow enough and there wasn't much chance he would hurt himself jumping off.

He come to that same idea, and as soon as he did he flung himself off the car with his arms spread out and his hair and coattails flying in the slipstream. I saw him land solid and go down and roll over once. Then he knelt there, shaking his head a little, looking around.

Well, he was the first floater we'd seen in seven months. The yard crews seal up the cars nowadays and they ain't many ride the rails anyhow, even down in our part of the country. But every now and then a floater wants to ride bad enough to break a seal, or hides himself in a gondola or on a loaded flat. Kids, oldtime hoboes, wanted men. They's still a few.

And some of 'em get off right down where this one had, because they know the St. Louis freight stops in Sabreville and they's yardmen there that check the string, or because they see the run-down shacks of the old hobo jungle or Ferdie Johnson's melon patch. Man rides a freight long enough, no provisions, he gets mighty hungry. The sight of a melon patch like Ferdie's is plenty enough to make him jump off.

"Billy Bob," I said.

"Yes, Granpa. You wait easy now."

He went off along the slope, running. I watched the floater, and he come up on his feet and got himself into a clump of bushes alongside the tracks to wait for the caboose to pass so's he wouldn't be seen. Pretty soon the last of the cars left the tunnel, and then the caboose with a signalman holding a red-eye lantern out on the platform. When she was down the tracks and just

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about beyond my sight, the floater showed himself again and had him another look around. Then, sure enough, he made straight for the melon patch.

Once he got into it I couldn't see him because he was in close to the woods at the edge of the slope. I couldn't see Billy Bob neither. The whistle sounded one final time, mournful, as the lights of the caboose disappeared, and a chill come to my neck and set there like a cold dead hand. I closed my eyes and listened to the last singing of the wheels fade away.

It weren't long before I heard footfalls on the slope coming near, then the angry sound of a stranger's voice, but I kept my eyes shut until they walked up close and Billy Bob said, "Granpa." When I opened 'em the floater was standing three feet in front of me, white face shining—scared face, angry face, evil face.

"What the hell is this?" he said. "What you want with me?"

"Give me your gun, Billy Bob," I said.

He did it, and I held her tight and lifted the barrel. The ache in my stomach was so strong my knees felt weak and I could scarcely breathe. But my hand was steady.

The floater's eyes come wide-open and he backed off a step. "Hey," he said, "hey, you can't—"

I shot him twice.

He fell over and rolled some and come up on his back. They wasn't no doubt he was dead, so I give the gun back to Billy Bob and he put it away in his belt. "All right, boy," I said.

Billy Bob nodded and went over and hoisted the dead floater onto his shoulder. I watched him trudge off towards the bog hollow, and in my mind I could hear the train whistle as she'd sounded from inside the tunnel. I thought again, as I had so many times, that it was the way my boy Rufus and Billy Bob's ma must have sounded that night in 1947, when the two floaters from the hobo jungle broke into their home and raped her and shot Rufus to death. She lived just long enough to tell us about the floaters, but they was never caught. So it was up to me, and then up to me and Billy Bob when he come of age.

Well, it ain't like it once was and that saddens me. But they's still a few that ride the rails, still a few take it into their heads to jump off down there when the St. Louis freight slows coming through the Chigger Mountain tunnel.

Oh my yes, they'll *always* be a few for me and Billy Bob and the sweet fever inside us both.

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a *NEW* Captain Cork novelet by

S. S. RAFFERTY

Captain Jeremy Cork, colonial criminologist and Eighteenth Century solver of social puzzles, suffers from the same professional affliction that Nineteenth Century and Twentieth Century detectives are cursed with: wherever Cork goes he encounters mystery and crime. This time, during the Christmas holiday of 1754, he looks upon the ugly face of murder.

The scene is the grand ballroom of the van Schooners' manse on Broad Way where the cream of New York society gathers, on Christmas Eve, to witness the coronation of the New Year's Queen—the social event of the season, the highspot of the week's festivities . . .

It is a complex case, with riddles within riddles, tangles entangled in tangles, masks masking masks. But Captain Cork, an autocrat of a detective, is at the top of his form . . .

THE CHRISTMAS MASQUE

by S. S. RAFFERTY

As much as I prefer the steady ways of New England, I have to agree with Captain Jeremy Cork that the Puritans certainly know how to avoid a good time. They just ignore it. That's why every 23rd of December we come to the New York colony from our home base in Connecticut to celebrate the midwinter holidays.

I am often critical of my employer's inattention to his many business enterprises and his preoccupation with the solution of crime—but I give him credit for the way he keeps Christmas. That is, as long as I can stop him from keeping it clear into February.

In our travels about these colonies, I have witnessed many merry parties, from the lush gentility of the Carolinas to the roughshod ribaldry of the New Hampshire tree line; but nothing

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can match the excitement of the Port of New York. The place teems with prosperous men who ply their fortunes in furs, potash, naval timber, and other prime goods. And the populace is drawn from everywhere: Sephardim from Brazil, Huguenots from France, visitors from London, expatriates from Naples, Irishmen running to or from something. I once counted 18 different languages being spoken here.

And so it was in the Christmas week of 1754 that we took our usual rooms at Marshall's in John Street, a few steps from the Histrionic Academy, and let the yuletide roll over us. Cork's celebrity opens many doors to us, and there was the expected flood of invitations for one frivolity after another.

I was seated at a small work table in our rooms on December 23, attempting to arrange our social obligations into a reasonable program. My primary task was to sort out those invitations which begged our presence on Christmas Eve itself, for that would be our highpoint. Little did I realize that a knock on our door would not only decide the issue, but plunge us into one of the most bizarre of those damnable social puzzles Cork so thoroughly enjoys.

The messenger was a small lad, no more than seven or eight, and he was bundled against the elements from head to toe. Before I could open the envelope to see if an immediate reply was required, the child was gone.

I was opening the message when Cork walked in from the inner bedchamber. Marshall's is one of the few places on earth with doorways high enough to accommodate his six-foot-six frame.

"I take the liberty," I said. "It's addressed to us both."

"On fine French linen paper, I see."

"Well, well," I said, reading the fine handscript. "This is quite an honour."

"From the quality of the paper and the fact that you are 'honoured' just to read the message, I assume the reader is rich, money being the primer for your respect, Oaks."

That is not absolutely true. I find nothing wrong with poverty; however, it is a condition I do not wish to experience. In fact, as Cork's financial yeoman, it is my sworn duty to keep it from our door sill. The invitation was from none other than Dame Ilsa van Schooner, asking us to take part in her famous Christmas Eve Masque at her great house on the Broad Way. Considering that we had already been invited to such questionable activities as a cockfight, a party at a doss house, a drinking duel at Cosgrove's,

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and an evening of sport at the Gentlemen's Club, I was indeed honoured to hear from a leader of New York quality.

Cork was glancing at the invitation when I discovered a smaller piece of paper still in the envelope.

"This is odd," I said, reading it:

van Schooner Haus
22 December

Dear Sirs:

I implore you to accept the enclosed, for I need you very much to investigate a situation of some calamity for us. I shall make myself known at the Masque.

It was unsigned. I passed it to the Captain, who studied it for a moment and then picked up the invitation again.

"I'm afraid your being honoured is misplaced, my old son," he said. "The invitation was written by a skilled hand, possibly an Ephrata penman, hired for such work. But our names have been fitted in by a less skilled writer. The author of the note has by some means invited us without the hostess' knowledge. Our *sub rosa* bidder must be in some dire difficulty, for she does not dare risk discovery by signing her name."

"Her?"

"No doubt about it. The hand is feminine and written in haste. I thought it odd that a mere boy should deliver this. It is usually the task of a footman, who would wait for a reply. This is truly intriguing—an impending calamity stalking the wealthy home in which she lives."

"How can you be sure of that, sir?"

"I can only surmise. She had access to the invitations and she says 'calamity for us,' which implies her family. Hello." He looked up suddenly as the door opened and a serving girl entered with a tray, followed by a man in royal red. "Sweet Jerusalem!" Cork got to his feet. "Major Tell in the flesh! Sally, my girl, you had better have Marshall send up extra Apple Knock and oysters. Tell, it is prophetic that you should appear just as a new puzzle emerges."

Prophetic indeed. Major Philip Tell is a King's agent-at-large, and he invariably embroiled us in some case of skulduggery whenever he was in our purlieu. But I bode him no ill this time, for he had nothing to do with the affair. In fact, his vast knowledge of the colonial scene might prove helpful.

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"Well, lads," Tell said, taking off his *rogueloure* and tossing his heavy cloak onto a chair. "I knew Christmas would bring you to New York. You look fit, Captain, and I see Oaks is still at his account books."

When Cork told him of our invitation and the curious accompanying note, the officer gave a low whistle. "The van Schooners, no less! Well, we shall share the festivities, for I am also a guest at the affair. The note is a little disturbing, however. Dame Ilsa is the mistress of a large fortune and extensive land holdings, which could be the spark for foul play."

"You think she sent the note?" I asked.

"Nonsense," Cork interjected. "She would not have had to purloin her own invitation. What can you tell us of the household, Major?"

I don't know if Tell's fund of knowledge is part of his duties or his general nosiness, but he certainly keeps his ear to the ground. No gossip-monger could hold a candle to him.

"The family fortune was founded by her grandfather, Nils van der Malin—patroon holdings up the Hudson, pearl potash, naval stores, that sort of old money. Under Charles the Second's Duke of York grant, Nils was rewarded for his support with a baronetcy. The title fell in the distaff side to Dame Ilsa's mother, old Gretchen van der Malin. She was a terror of a woman, who wore men's riding clothes and ran her estates with an iron first and a riding crop. She had a young man of the Orange peerage brought over as consort, and they produced Ilsa. The current Dame is more genteel than her mother was, but just as stern and autocratic. She, in turn, married a van Schooner—Gustave, I believe, a soldier of some distinction in the Lowland campaigns. He died of drink after fathering two daughters, Gretchen and her younger sister; Wilda.

"The line is certainly Amazonite and breeds true," Cork said with a chuckle. "Not a climate I would relish, although strong women have their fascination."

"Breeds true is correct, Captain. The husbands were little more than sire stallions; good blood but ruined by idleness."

This last, about being "ruined by idleness," was ignored by Cork, but I marked it, as well he knew.

"Young Gretchen," Tell went on, "is also true to her namesake. A beauty, but cold as a steel blade, and as well honed. They say she is a dead shot and an adept horsewoman."

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"You have obviously been to the van Schooner haus, as our correspondent calls it."

"Oh, yes, on several occasions. It is truly a place to behold."

"No doubt, Major." Cork poured a glass of Apple Knock. "Who else lives there besides the servants?"

"The younger daughter Wilda, of course, and the Dame's spinster sister, Hetta van der Malin, and an ancient older brother of the dead husband—the brother is named Kaarl. I have only seen him once, but I am told he was quite the wastrel in his day, and suffers from the afflictions of such a life."

"Mmm," Cork murmured, offering the glass to Tell. "I change my original Amazonite observation to that of Queen Bee. Well, someone in that house feels in need of help, but we shall have to wait until to-morrow night to find out why."

"Or who," I said.

"That," Cork said, "is the heart of the mystery."

The snow started falling soon after dinner that night and kept falling into the dawn. By noon of the 24th, the wind had drifted nature's white blanket into knee-high banks. When it finally stopped in the late afternoon, New York was well covered under a blotchy sky. The inclemency, however, did not deter attendance at the van Schooner Ball.

I had seen the van Schooner home from the road many times, and always marveled at its striking architecture, which is in the Palladio style. The main section is a three-storey structure, and it is flanked by one-storey wings at both sides.

The lights and music emanating from the north wing clearly marked it a ballroom of immense size. The front entrance to the main house had a large raised enclosure which people in these parts call a stoop. The interior was as rich and well appointed as any manse I have ever seen. The main hall was a gallery of statuary of the Greek and Roman cast, collected, I assumed, when the family took the mandatory Grand Tour.

Our outer clothes were taken at the main door, and we were escorted through a sculptured archway across a large salon towards the ballroom proper. We had purposely come late to avoid the reception line and any possible discovery by Dame van Schooner. We need not have bothered. There were more than 200 people there, making individual acquaintance impossible. Not that some of the guests were without celebrity. The Royal Governor was in

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attendance, and I saw General Seaton and Solomon deSilva, the fur king, talking with Reeves, the shipping giant.

It was difficult to determine the identity of the majority of the people, for most wore masks, although not all, including Cork and myself. Tell fluttered off on his social duties, and Cork fell to conversation with a man named Downs, who had recently returned from Spanish America and shared common friends there with the Captain.

I helped myself to some hot punch and leaned back to take in the spectacle. It would be hard to say whether the men or the women were the more lushly bedizened. The males were adorned in the latest fashion with those large, and, to my mind, cumbersome rolled coat cuffs. The materials of their plumage were a dazzling mixture of gold and silver stuffs, bold brocades, and gaudy flowered velvets. The women, not to be outdone by their peacocks, were visions in fan-hooped gowns of silks and satins and fine damask. Each woman's *tête-de-moutin* back curls swung gaily as her partner spun her around the dance floor to madcap tunes such as "Roger de Coverly," played with spirit by a seven-piece ensemble. To the right of the ballroom entrance was a long table with three different punch bowls dispensing cheer.

The table was laden with all manner of great hams, glistening roast goose, assorted tidbit meats and sweets of unimaginable variety. Frothy syllabub was cupped up for the ladies by liveried footmen, while the gentlemen had their choice of Madeira, rum, champagne, or Holland gin, the last served in small crystal thimbles which were embedded and cooled in a silver bowl mounded with snow.

"This is most lavish," I said to Cork when he disengaged himself from conversation with Downs. "It's a good example of what diligent attention to industry can produce."

"Whose industry, Oaks? Wealth has nothing more to do with industry than privilege has with merit. Our hostess over there does not appear to have ever perspired in her life."

He was true to the mark in his observation, for Dame van Schooner, who stood chatting with the Governor near the buffet, was indeed as cold as fine-cut crystal. Her well formed face was sternly beautiful, almost arrogantly defying any one to marvel at its handsomeness and still maintain normal breathing.

"She *is* a fine figure of a woman, Captain, and, I might add, a widow."

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He gave me a bored look and said, "A man would die of frostbite in her bedchamber. Ah, Major Tell, congratulations! You are a master at the jig!"

"It's a fantastical do, but good for the liver, I'm told. Has the mysterious sender of your invitation made herself known to you?"

"Not as yet. Is that young lady now talking with the Dame one of her daughters?"

"Both of them are daughters. The one lifting her mask is Gretchen, and, I might add, the catch of the year. I am told she has been elected Queen of the Bal, and will be crowned this evening."

The girl was the image of her mother. Her sister, however, must have followed the paternal line.

"The younger one is Wilda," Tell went on, "a dark pigeon in her own right, but Gretchen is the catch."

"Catch, you say." I winked at Cork. "Perhaps *her* bedchamber would be warmer?"

"You'll find no purchase there, gentlemen," Tell told us. "Along with being crowned Queen, her betrothal to Brock van Loon will probably be announced this evening."

"Hand-picked by her mother, no doubt?" Cork asked.

"Everything is hand-picked by the Dame. Van Loon is a stout fellow, although a bit of a tailor's dummy. Family is well landed across the river in Brueckelen. Say, they're playing 'The Green Cockade,' Captain. Let me introduce you to Miss Borden, one of our finest steppers."

I watched them walk over to a comely piece of frippery and then Cork and the young lady stepped onto the dance floor. "The Green Cockade" is one of Cork's favourite tunes, and he dances it with gusto.

I drifted over to the serving table and took another cup of punch, watching all the time for some sign from our mysterious "hostess," whoever she was. I mused that the calamity mentioned in the note might well have been pure hyperbole, for I could not see how any misfortune could befall this wealthy, joyous home.

With Cork off on the dance floor, Tell returned to my side and offered to find a dance partner for me. I declined, not being the most nimble of men, but did accept his bid to introduce me to a lovely young women named Lydia Daws-Smith. The surname declared her to be the offspring of a very prominent family in the fur trade, and her breeding showed through a delightfully pretty

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face and pert figure. We were discussing the weather when I noticed four footmen carrying what appeared to be a closed sedan chair into the hall and through a door at the rear.

"My word, is a Sultan among the assemblage?" I asked my companion.

"The sedan chair?" She giggled from behind her fan. "No, Mr. Oaks, no Sultan. It's our Queen's throne. Gretchen will be transported into the hall at the stroke of midnight, and the Governor will proclaim her our New Year's Sovereign." She stopped for a moment, the smile gone. "Then she will step forward to our acclaim and, of course, mandatory idolatry."

"I take it you do not like Gretchen very much, Miss Daws-Smith."

"On the contrary, sir. She is one of my best friends. Now you will have to excuse me, for I see Gretchen is getting ready for the crowning, and I must help her."

I watched the young girl as she followed Gretchen to the rear of the hall where they entered a portal and closed the door behind them. Seconds later, Lydia Daws-Smith came back into the main hall and spoke with the Dame, who then went through the rear door.

Cork had finished his dance and rejoined me. "This exercise may be good for the liver," he said, "but it plays hell with my thirst. Shall we get some refills?"

We walked back to the buffet table to slake his thirst, if that were ever possible. From the corner of my eye I caught sight of the Dame re-entering the hall from the rear door. She crossed over to the Governor and was about to speak to him when the orchestra struck up another tune. She seemed angry at the intrusion into what was obviously to have been the beginning of the coronation. But the Dame was ladylike and self-contained until the dancing was over. She then took a deep breath and nervously adjusted the neckline of her dress, which was shamefully bare from the bodice to the neck.

"Looks like the coronation is about to begin," Major Tell said, coming up to us. "I'll need a cup for the toast."

We were joking at the far end of the table when a tremendous crash sounded. We turned to see a distraught Wilda van Schooner looking down at the punch bowl she had just dropped. The punch had splashed down her beautiful velvet dress, leaving her drenched and mortified.

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"Oh-oh," Tell said under his breath. "Now we'll hear some fireworks from Dame van Schooner."

True to his prediction, the Dame sailed across the floor and gave biting instructions to the footmen to bring mops and pails. A woman, who Tell told me in a whisper was Hetta van der Malin, the Dame's sister, came out of the crowd of tittering guests to cover her niece's embarrassment.

"She was only trying to help, Ilsa," the aunt said as she dabbed the girl's dress with a handkerchief.

The Dame glared at them. "You'd better help her change, Hetta, if she is going to attend the coronation."

The aunt and niece quickly left the ballroom and the Dame whirled her skirts and returned to the Governor's side. I overheard her say her apologies to him and then she added, "My children don't seem to know what servants are for. Well, shall we begin?"

At a wave of her hand, the orchestra struck up the "Grenadier's March," and six young stalwarts lined up in two ranks before the Governor. At his command, the lads did a left turn and marched off towards the rear portal in the distinctive long step of the regiment whose music they had borrowed for the occasion.

They disappeared into the room where Gretchen waited for transport, and within seconds they returned, bearing the ornate screened sedan chair. "Aah's" filled the room over the beauty and pageantry of the piece. I shot a glance at Dame van Schooner and noted that she was beaming proudly at the impeccably executed production.

When the sedan chair had been placed before the Governor, he stepped forward, took the curtain drawstrings, and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, I give you our New Year's Queen."

The curtains were pulled open and there she sat in majesty. More "aah's" from the ladies until there was a screech and then another and, suddenly, pandemonium. Gretchen van Schooner sat on her portable throne, still beautiful, but horribly dead with a French bayonet through her chest.

"My Lord!" Major Tell gasped and started forward toward the sedan chair. Cork touched his arm.

"You can do no good there. The rear room, man, that's where the answer lies. Come, Oaks." He moved quickly through the crowd and I followed like a setter's tail on point. When we reached the door, Cork turned to Tell.

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"Major, use your authority to guard this door. Let no one enter." He motioned me inside and closed the door behind us.

It was a small room, furnished in a masculine manner. Game trophies and the heads of local beasts protruded from the walls and were surrounded by a symmetrical display of weaponry such as daggers, blunderbusses, and swords.

"Our killer had not far to look for his instrument of death," Cork said, pointing to an empty spot on the wall about three feet from the fireplace and six feet up from the floor. "Move with care, Oaks, lest we disturb some piece of evidence."

I quickly looked around the rest of the chamber. There was a door in the south wall and a small window some ten feet to the left of it.

"The window!" I cried. "The killer must have come in—"

"I'm afraid not, Oaks," Cork said, after examining it. "The snow on the sill and panes is undisturbed. Besides, the floor in here is dry. Come, let's open the other door."

He drew it open to reveal a short narrow passage that was dimly lit with one sconced candle and had another door at its end. I started toward it and found my way blocked by Cork's outthrust arm.

"Have a care, Oaks," he said. "Don't confound a trail with your own spore. Fetch a candelabrum from the table for more light."

I did so, and to my amazement he got down on his hands and knees and inched forward along the passageway. I, too, assumed this stance and we crept along like a brace of hounds.

The polished planked floor proved dry and bare of dust until we were in front of the outer door. There, just inside the portal, was a pool of liquid.

"My Lord, it is blood!" I said.

"Mostly water from melted snow."

"But, Captain, there is a red stain to it."

"Yes," he said. "Bloody snow and yet the bayonet in that woman's breast was driven with such force that no blood escaped from her body."

Cork got to his feet and lifted the door latch, opening the passageway to pale white moonlight which reflected off the granules of snow. He carefully looked at the doorstoop and then out into the yard.

"Damnation," he muttered, "it looks as if an army tramped through here."

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Before us, the snow was a mass of furrows and upheavals with no one set of footprints discernible.

"Probably the servants coming and going from the wood yard down by the gate," I said, as we stepped out into the cold. At the opposite end of the house, in the left wing, was another door, obviously leading to the kitchen, for a clatter of plates and pots could be heard within the snug and frosty windowpanes. I turned to Cork and found myself alone. He was at the end of the yard opening a slatted gate in the rear garden wall.

"What ho, Captain," I called ahead, as I went to meet him.

"The place abounds in footprints," he snarled in frustration.

"Then the killer has escaped us," I muttered. "Now we have the whole population of this teeming port to consider."

He turned slowly, the moonlight glistening off his barba, his eyes taking on a sardonic glint. "For the moment, Oaks, for the moment. Besides, footprints are like empty boots. In the long run we would have had to fill them."

I started to answer when a voice called from our backs, at the passage doorway. It was Major Tell.

"Hello, is that you there, Cork? Have you caught the dastard?"

"Some gall," I said to the Captain. "As if we could pull the murderer out of our sleeves like a magician."

"Not yet, Major," Cork shouted and then turned to me. "Your powers of simile are improving, Oaks."

"Well," I said, with a bit of a splutter. "Do you think magic is involved?"

"No, you ass. Sleight of hand! The quick flick that the eye does not see nor the mind inscribe. We'll have to use our intincts on this one."

He strode off towards the house and I followed. I have seen him rely on instinct over hard evidence only two times in our years together, and in both cases, although he was successful, the things he uncovered were too gruesome to imagine.

The shock that had descended on the van Schooner manse at midnight still lingered three hours later when the fires in the great fireplaces were reduced to embers, the shocked guests had been questioned, and all but the key witnesses had been sent homeward. Cork, after consultation with the Royal Governor, had been given a free hand in the investigation, with Major Tell stirred in to keep the manner of things official.

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Much to my surprise, the Captain didn't embark on a flurry of questions of all concerned, but rather drew up a large baronial chair to the ballroom hearth and brooded into its sinking glow.

"Two squads of cavalry are in the neighbourhood," Major Tell said. "If any stranger were in the vicinity, he must have been seen."

"You can discount a stranger, Major," Cork said, still gazing into the embers.

"How so?"

"Merely a surmise, but with stout legs to it. If a stranger came to kill, he would have brought a weapon with him. No, the murderer knew the contents of the den's walls. He also seems to have known the coronation schedule."

"The window," I interjected. "He could have spied the bayonet, and when the coast was clear, entered and struck."

"Except for the singular fact that the snow on the ground in front of the window is undisturbed."

"Well, obviously someone entered by the back passage," Tell said. "We have the pool of water and the blood."

"Then where are the wet footprints into the den, Major?"

"Boots!" I shouted louder than I meant to. "He took off his boots and then donned them again on leaving."

"Good thinking, Oaks," Tell complimented me. "And in the process, his bloody hands left a trace in the puddle."

"And what, pray, was the motive?" Cork asked. "Nothing of value was taken that we can determine. No, we will look within this house for an answer."

Tell was appalled. "Captain Cork, I must remind you that this is the home of a powerful woman, and she was hostess to-night to the cream of New York society. Have a care how you cast aspersions."

"The killer had best have a care, Major. For a moment, let us consider some *facts*. Mistress Gretchen went into the den to prepare for her coronation with the aid of—ah—"

"Lydia Daws-Smith," I supplied.

"So we have one person who saw her before she died. Then these six society bucks who were to transport her entered, and among their company was Brock van Loon, her affianced. Seven people involved between the time we all saw her enter the den and the time she was carried out dead."

"Eight," I said, and then could have bit my tongue.

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"Who else?" Cork demanded.

"The Dame herself. I saw her enter after Miss Daws-Smith came out."

"That is highly irresponsible, Oaks," Tell admonished.

"And interesting," Cork said. "Thank you, Oaks, you have put some yeast into it with your observation."

"You're not suggesting that the Dame killed her own daughter!"

"Major," Cork said, "she-animals have been known to eat their young when they are endangered. But enough of this conjecture. Let us get down to rocks and hard places. We will have to take it step by step. First, let us have a go at the footmen who carried the chair into the den before Gretchen entered."

They were summoned, and the senior man, a portly fellow named Trask, spoke for the lot.

"No, sir," he answered Cork's question. "I am sure no one was lurking in the room when we entered. There is no place to hide."

"And the passage to the back door?"

"Empty, sir. You see, the door leading to the passage was open and I went over to close it against any draughts coming into the den. There was no one in the den, sir, I can swear to it."

"Is the outside door normally kept locked?"

"Oh, yes, sir. Leastways, it's supposed to be. It was locked earlier this afternoon when I made my rounds, preparing for the festivities."

"Tell me, Trask," Cork asked, "do you consider yourself a good servant, loyal to your mistress' household?"

The man's chubby face looked almost silly with its beaming pride. "Twenty-two years in this house, sir, from kitchen boy to head footman, and every day of it in the Dame's service."

"Very commendable, Trask, but you are most extravagant with tapers."

"Sir?" Trask looked surprised.

"If the backyard door was locked, why did you leave a candle burning in the passageway? Since no one could come in from the outside, no light would be needed as a guide. Certainly any one entering from the den would carry his own."

"But, Captain," the footman protested, "I left no light in the passageway. When I was closing the inner door, I held a candelabrum in my hand, and could see clear to the other end. There was no candle lit."

"My apologies, Trask. Thank you, that will be all."

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When the footmen had left, I said, "Yet we found a lit candle out there right after the murder. The killer must have left it in his haste."

Cork merely shrugged. Then he said, "So we go a little further. Major, I would like to see Miss Daws-Smith next."

Despite the circumstances, I was looking forward to seeing the comely Miss Daws-Smith once more. However, she was not alone when she entered, and her escort made it clear by his protective manner that her beauty was his property alone. She sat down in a straight-backed chair opposite Cork, nervously fingering the fan in her lap. Brock van Loon took a stance behind her.

"I prefer to speak to this young lady alone," Cork said.

"I am aware of your reputation, Captain Cork," van Loon said defensively, "and I do not intend to have Lydia drawn into this."

"Young man, she *is* in it, and from your obvious concern for her, I'd say you are, too."

"It is more than concern, sir. I love Lydia and she loves me."

"Brock," the girl said, turning to him.

"I don't care, Lydia. I don't care what my father says and I don't care what the Dame thinks."

"That's a rather anti-climactic statement, young man. Since your betrothed is dead, you are free of that commitment."

"You see, Brock? Now he suspects that we had something to do with Gretchen's death. I swear, Captain, we had no hand in it."

"Possibly not as cohorts. Was Gretchen in love with this fellow?"

"No. I doubt Gretchen could love any man. She was like her mother, and was doing her bidding as far as a marriage went. The van Schooner women devour males. Brock knows what would have become of him. He saw what happened to Gretchen's father."

"Her father?"

"Gustave van Schooner," Brock said, "died a worthless drunkard locked away on one of the family estates up the Hudson. He had been a valiant soldier, I am told, and yet, once married to the Dame, he was reduced to a captured stallion."

"Quite poetic," Cork said. "Now, my dear, can you tell me what happened when you and Gretchen entered the den this evening?"

The girl stopped toying with the fan and sent her left hand to her shoulder where Brock had placed his. "There's nothing to tell, really. We went into the den together and I asked her if she wanted a cup of syllabub. She said no."

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"What was her demeanour? Was she excited?"

"About being the Queen? Mercy, no. She saw that as her due. Gretchen was not one to show emotion." She stopped suddenly in thought and then said, "But now that I think back, she was fidgety. She walked over to the fireplace and tapped on the mantel with her fingers. Then she turned and said, 'Tell the Dame I'm ready,' which was strange, because she never called her mother that."

"Was she being sarcastic?"

"No, Captain, more a poutiness. I went and gave Dame van Schooner the message. That was the last I saw of Gretchen." Her eyes started to moisten. "The shock is just wearing off, I suppose. She was spoiled and autocratic, but Gretchen was a good friend."

"Hardly, Miss Daws-Smith. She had appropriated your lover."

"No. She knew nothing of how I felt towards Brock. We were all children together, you see—Gretchen, Wilda, Brock, and I. When you grow up that way, you don't always know childish affection from romantic love. I admit that when plans were being made for the betrothal, love for Brock burned in me, but I hid it, Captain, I hid it well. Then, earlier this evening, Brock told me how he felt, and I was both elated and miserable. I decided that both Brock and I would go the Dame to-morrow. Gretchen knew nothing of our love."

"And you, sir," Cork said to Brock, "you made no mention of your change of heart to Gretchen?"

The fellow bowed his head. "Not in so many words. This has been coming on me for weeks, this feeling I have for Lydia. Just now as you were talking to her, I wondered—God, how terrible!—if Gretchen could have committed suicide out of despair."

"Oh, Brock!" Lydia was aghast at his words.

"Come," Cork commanded sharply, "this affair is burdensome enough without the added baggage of melodrama. Use your obvious good sense, Miss Daws-Smith. Is it likely that this spoiled and haughty woman would take her own life? Over a man?"

Lydia raised her head and looked straight at Cork. "No. No, of course not. It's ridiculous."

"Now, Mr. van Loon, when you entered the den with the others in the escort party to bring in the sedan chair, were the curtains pulled shut?"

"Yes, they were."

"And no one spoke to its occupant?"

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"No, we didn't."

"Strange, isn't it? Such a festive occasion, and yet no one spoke?"

"We were in a hurry to get her out to where the Governor was waiting. Wait, someone did say, 'Hang on, Gretchen' when we lifted the chair. I don't remember who said it, though."

"You heard no sound from inside the chair? No groan or murmur?"

"No, sir, not a sound."

"Well thank you for your candour. Oh, yes, Miss Daws-Smith, when you left Gretchen, was she still standing by the fire?"

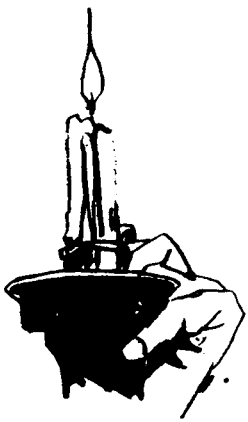
"Yes, Captain."

"Was her mask on or off?"

She frowned. "Why, she had it on. What a queer question!"

"It's a queer case, young lady."

(continued on page 104)



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a *NEW* short story by

JOYCE HARRINGTON

The two sisters were inseparable. They did everything together—worked together, traveled together, planned together, dreamed together, and looked for husbands together. The trouble was—their high standards. Second-best would not do—simply would not do. And then Norman Jolly came into the life of one of the sisters . . .

THE TWO SISTERS

by *JOYCE HARRINGTON*

The sisters were inseparable.

They lived together, in a suburban apartment where each had her separate room of equal size. They rode to work on a bus crowded with other suburban commuters, but they always found a seat together. They worked together, in a travel agency where together they plotted exotic tours for finicky travelers to places the sisters had never seen. Once a year they took a cut-rate cruise, together, to a sunny island where they drank rum drinks chunked with tropical fruit and lolled on the beach in outrageous bikinis. They hoped to find husbands.

It wasn't easy. The sisters had high standards. They vowed to each other that they would never accept second-best. But the best was elusive and hard to define. He must be handsome, of course, but where was the dividing line between handsome and not handsome? He must be rich, but how rich was rich enough? He must be kind, considerate, and intelligent.

They agreed that a doctor would do nicely, and in a pinch a dentist, although there was something not quite pleasant about the thought of hands that probed anonymous mouths all day. Lawyers were in, and salesmen were out. Stockbrokers were ideal. University professors were undoubtedly nice, but poor.

Engineers were acceptable, providing they were not vulgar. Ar-

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tists and writers of any kind, however rich and handsome, were likely to be unstable. Best of all would be a young man, or rather two young men, of independent means who recognized the fragile beauty and sterling virtues of the two sisters.

The sisters made the most of the miniature style of beauty they shared. They were equally small and identically slender, and possessed similar heart-shaped faces. Marjorie, the older by two years, accented her gamine quality by wearing her dark hair cropped short in springing curls, while Audrey allowed hers to swing in a dark curtain to her shoulders.

Assiduously, they developed all the talents they calculated they would need when they at last became mistresses of fine houses, neighboring, of course, in the most exclusive suburb. They played golf and tennis, learned gourmet cooking, studied antiques and wine, took part in amateur theatricals, and spoke disparagingly of everyone they knew.

Once, when Marjorie was being eagerly pursued by a young accountant and seemed on the point of capitulation, Audrey saved her by a few cutting words.

"He's nothing but a glorified bookkeeper. You might as well marry a computer. Computers never get rich. They only count other people's money."

Marjorie, brought to her senses, quickly totted up the debits and credits and arrived at a minus balance. Her accounting suitor had sweaty palms and bowled on the company team. No, he would never do.

Again, when Audrey was being showered with expensive gifts by a distinguished-looking although middle-aged pencil manufacturer, it was Marjorie who found out the awful truth.

"He already has a wife."

"He'll get a divorce, I'm sure he will," Audrey asserted. "He's very rich."

"Better make sure," cautioned Marjorie.

But although the pencil magnate proposed setting Audrey up in a luxurious apartment and promised undying love and a place in his will, he did not propose to divorce his wife and put Audrey in her place. Regretfully, Audrey wrote him off. She kept the mink jacket, the diamond wrist watch, and all the other tokens of his esteem.

The years passed in double dates and disappointment. The shifting population of the suburban apartment complex seemed to

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grow younger and younger. The few friends they had made among the apartment dwellers had long since married and moved to neat suburban split-levels where they raised children, puppies, and tomatoes, and worried about the mortgage. A dreary life, the sisters agreed, and after a few years they stopped sending cards at Christmas.

One summer the sisters noticed they were no longer included in the splashing frolics in the apartment's pool. They knew none of the playful young creatures who swam and ducked each other and shrieked with merriment in the bright chlorined water. If they noticed the giggles and whispers that greeted their approach to the pool, they did not comment even to each other. Someone labeled their mailbox: The Weird Sisters.

Audrey was furious and complained to the management.

Marjorie shrugged and said, "At least they know some Shakespeare."

That was the summer Marjorie began pulling gray threads out of her gamine curls and Audrey took up needlepoint. It was that summer, too, that a whole month went by without a single date. The sisters did something they had never done before. They stopped at a cocktail lounge after work and sipped two whiskey sours apiece before boarding their suburban bus.

They had never been in a bar unescorted and they felt conspicuous. They sat nervously at a tiny table in a dark corner and chattered over their drinks of the day's happenings at the travel agency. But although they kept their eyes studiously averted from the crowd of noisy men at the bar and their mouths moved in a semblance of conversation, their ears remained attuned to the babble of the drinkers.

When the bartender approached their table with two more drinks on a tray and said, "Compliments of the gentleman at the end," the sisters turned startled to see a grinning florid face nodding on top of a pair of beefy shoulders in a loud plaid jacket. The sisters shook their heads primly, paid their bill, and left.

But they returned the next day. And the next. Soon it became a habit with them to stop after work at one cocktail lounge or another. Faces became familiar and some even acquired names. Summer sweltered moistly into fall, and still no one called to take them out to dinner or even to a movie.

"Everyone must be out of town," said Audrey.

Marjorie mulled over her address book, crossing off names of

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those who had proved unworthy, or had got married or moved to jobs in distant cities. When she finished, she threw the little book in the wastebasket and lay on her bed and cried.

In September the Riverside Players began rehearsals for their fall season. The first play was to be *The Royal Family,* and the sisters attended tryouts. Audrey preferred to work backstage and volunteered to do costumes. Marjorie was confident she would be asked to play one of the young women's parts. The sisters were relieved that the long dull summer had ended and their evenings and weekends would now be filled. The director asked Marjorie to read the part of Fanny Cavendish, matriarch of the play's theatrical clan.

"But she's seventy years old!" protested Majorie.

"There's no one else who can do it," said the director. "It's a terrific role."

"But I'd really rather play Gwen or even Julie."

"Fanny's the best part in the play. You'll have a ball."

"I will *not* have a ball! Count me out."

Marjorie brooded for a week, while Audrey sketched page after page of luscious 1920's costumes. Majorie glanced over the sketches without enthusiasm.

"Who have they got to play Fanny?" Marjorie asked.

"Nobody yet. What do you think of this gown? Plum satin with just a hint of a train. And this one? Champagne lace over an apricot underdress."

"Sounds like fruit salad to me."

But when the director called at the end of a week to appeal to Marjorie as an old trouper and one of the founding members of the group, she agreed reluctantly to do her best with the help of makeup and silver hair spray. "At least it's an important part. But you've got to give me a young one later on," she insisted.

"I'll try. But, Marj, it's time you got out of the ingenue routine."

"Perhaps you're right. Well, I'll see you at rehearsal."

Rehearsals did not interfere with the sisters' habit of stopping at their favorite cocktail lounge after work. There was plenty of time for their usual two whiskey sours and a quick meal at home before they had to appear at the playhouse in the old church. One day, when Audrey stayed home with a mild case of flu, Marjorie found herself seated at their tiny table alone. So accustomed had she become to the routine, she felt neither conspicuous nor promiscuous, as she might have done a month ago.

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The bartender brought her usual drink and inquired after Audrey. Then he left her alone. Marjorie opened her script and mumbled over Fanny Cavendish's lines while she sipped her whiskey sour. She was deeply immersed when a hesitant voice disturbed her mood.

"Do you—ah—would you mind if I—ah—sat down here?"

She looked up and saw a lanky gray-haired man bobbing before her like a small boy begging for a cookie. His face was boyish, too, despite its lines, and his mouth was curved in an engaging small-boy smile. She quickly categorized him as "not worth bothering with" and "probably married" and was about to utter a freezing "Yes, I mind very much." But his smile widened to a grin and his gray eyes crinkled in a most beguiling way.

"Please don't think I'm trying to make a pickup. I'm new in town, and I saw you studying a script. I used to be interested in little theater, a long time ago. My name is Norman Jolly."

Norman Jolly waited politely for Marjorie's permission to sit down. After a moment's hesitation she gave it and introduced herself. What harm could it do? The Riverside Players were always looking for new recruits.

"*The Royal Family*!" he exclaimed, when she showed him her script. "That certainly brings back memories! I once played Tony Cavendish and thought I was a new John Barrymore. But you're much too young to play Fanny."

Marjorie glowed. "I'm only doing it as a favor," she explained. "There are no older women in the group."

They sipped their drinks and Norman Jolly told her briefly of his life—his years as a high-school science teacher, his two children now grown and married, the death of his wife a year ago.

"I moved here to be near my daughter," he said. "And I opened up a little hobby shop to occupy my time. It doesn't make much money, but it's fun. If I want to close up and go fishing, I just put a sign in the window. But I need to get involved in something else. My daughter has her own life. She doesn't need her old father hanging around all the time. Do you think—?"

"Would you like to come to rehearsal with me?" asked Marjorie.

"Now that's a fine idea. Maybe I could make myself useful." Norman Jolly grinned that appealing little-boy grin. "And here's another good idea. Have dinner with me."

"All right," said Marjorie. "All right, I will."

Marjorie excused herself and went to the telephone. Audrey was

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better but still weak, and thought she would skip rehearsal. The costumes were being worked on and there was no urgent reason for her to be there.

"Then I think I'll grab a bite to eat downtown and go directly to the playhouse," said Marjorie.

Audrey asked no questions and Marjorie volunteered no information about Norman Jolly.

When she returned to the table, Norman had paid the bill and was ready to go. He took her arm protectively, and Marjorie felt surprisingly warm and sheltered.

"Where shall we go?" he asked. "I'll leave it up to you."

In years past, when asked that question, Marjorie always chose the most expensive restaurant in town. Now she considered carefully.

"We can't make an evening of it," she said. "I have to be at rehearsal by eight o'clock. Let's go to Maude's—home cooking and not too expensive. I hope you don't mind plastic tablecloths."

"I'll be too busy looking at you," said Norman Jolly.

Marjorie was confused by this transparent gallantry. Wordlessly, she allowed him to lead her to the parking lot, and his opening of the door of his battered old car seemed to her a kind of courtly ritual. He insisted that she fasten her safety belt. She did, and felt safe.

Dinner at Maude's was plain and nourishing. Norman, it seemed, was fond of lemon meringue pie and Maude made her own. Norman had two slices and complimented Maude graciously on its lightness and true lemon flavor. Maude beamed on both of them and Marjorie felt something she had not felt for a long time—pride in her companion.

At rehearsal Marjorie was swept immediately into scene blocking and left Norman on his own in the small auditorium. Once or twice, when she glanced from the stage, she saw him chatting with the director. At another time she caught a glimpse of him backstage, studiously examining the lighting board. When the rehearsal was over, she found that Norman Jolly had become a member of the group, had paid his dues, and was going to be the lighting technician for the show. She felt an odd satisfaction, and an even odder anticipation.

It was the habit of the group to gather after rehearsals at an all-night coffee shop where they pushed three or four tables together and spent an hour talking over the night's work and relax-

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ing. Marjorie noticed how easily Norman fitted into the group.

In the ladies' room one of the young girls, the one who had got the part that Marjorie had had her heart set on, said, "Norman is really nice, isn't he? Where did you find him?"

Marjorie felt a flare of something that could only be jealousy. "He is nice. Finders keepers," she replied and smiled to show she was joking.

"Oh, don't worry," said the girl. "He only has eyes for you."

Marjorie went back to the table with a lighter heart than she could ever remember.

Later, when Norman drove up the winding drive to her apartment building, Marjorie debated whether or not she should ask him in. Audrey would probably be in bed, but if she weren't she wouldn't be in the right mood to meet Norman. But Norman forestalled her.

"Thank you for a grand evening," he said. "And thank you for bringing me to the Riverside Players. It'll be good to have something to do with my evenings. Who knows, I may even tread the boards again, although it's been over thirty years and I probably won't know upstage from down. May I meet you again tomorrow night?"

"But there isn't any rehearsal tomorrow night."

"I know. We can have the whole evening to ourselves."

Marjorie thought quickly. If Audrey were well tomorrow, she would be back on the job and ready to resume their cocktail routine.

"Call me at work tomorrow. Here's my number."

Norman took the scrap of paper and tucked it into his billfold. Marjorie noticed how slim the folded leather was and her heart constricted. He took her hand, patted it, grinned, and got out of the car. Again the ritual with the door, and Marjorie felt as if she were wearing hoop skirts as he helped her get out. He escorted her to the door of the building, and from the vestibule she watched as he waved, blew her a chaste kiss, and drove away.

The next morning Marjorie rode the bus alone. Audrey was still weak, and since it was Friday she thought she might as well take a long weekend to rest up. The sisters had seniority at the travel agency and never worked on Saturdays.

Marjorie hummed little tuneless hums softly to herself as she made out itineraries and wished customers happy taveling. Each time the phone rang she picked it up expecting to hear Norman

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Jolly's voice. When she realized that she was impatient for his call, she stopped humming and began belatedly to take stock. He wasn't handsome, although he had a winsome charm. He certainly wasn't rich. And he was much, much older than she. How much? Fifteen years, twenty years? It was hard to tell. His eyes were so young.

Suddenly Marjorie realized that it didn't matter. None of it mattered at all. This was certainly a day for realizations. She began humming again as she sent a honeymoon couple to Montreal.

When Norman finally called, Marjorie had already eaten her lunch—cottage cheese and fruit salad which she'd had sent in. She didn't want to take the chance of being out when he called.

"Hi," he said. "Sorry to be so late, but I've been baby sitting."

"Baby—?"

"My daughter had to go to the dentist and her usual sitter got sick. That little hellion of hers certainly kept me hopping. I took him over to the hobby shop and let him run the trains, but I had to watch him every minute."

"How old is he?"

"Three. Now about this evening. I'd like to pick you up after work and take you out to meet my daughter and her husband. You'll like them. Susie's already cooking up a storm."

"Just a minute. I have to answer the other phone."

Marjorie pressed the hold button and took a deep breath. Norman Jolly was a grandfather! Why hadn't she thought of that possibility? If she—if they—could she face being a grandmother before she was a mother? Suddenly she felt like laughing. After all the years of having no family but Audrey and no security but what she could grab for herself, here she was being plunged up to the neck in a complicated tangle of relationships.

What if she and Norman did get married? What if they had a child? It wasn't impossible. That child would be the uncle or aunt of Susie's child. Susie who was cooking up a storm to lavish on the new lady in her father's life. Oh, it was funny! Funny and warm and very, very appealing. Marjorie punched down the button that reconnected her with Norman.

"Norman? Are you still there? Of course I'll come. Meet me in the same place. I think I'll need a little reinforcement."

"Okay. I told Susie and Bob all about you and they're dying to meet you. They think it's wonderful that you were kind enough to

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take me along to rehearsal. And so do I. See you later."

But, Marjorie reflected as she hung up the phone, you didn't tell them *all* about me. You don't know about Audrey yet. You'll have to meet Audrey and I can just hear her now: "A retired schoolteacher! Living on a pension, I suppose. What a grand life you'll have. And he's so *old*. Well, at least we can be thankful you'll be a young widow. A poor young widow."

Marjorie straightened her back and did her best to forget about Audrey. She really ought to call her and tell her she wouldn't be home for dinner. But not right now. Marjorie hummed through the rest of the afternoon and at closing time hurried bilthely down the street and around the corner.

Norman was waiting for her at their table. Hers and Norman's. Hers and Audrey's? It flitted through her mind that she had not yet called Audrey. Later. Right now Norman was rising and bending over her, smiling in his crinkly way and wrapping her in the warmth of his welcoming words.

Later there was no time. Norman was bounding with eagerness to take Marjorie to his daughter's home. They each had one drink—Norman gulped his down—and off they went, Norman full of anecdotes about his grandson, Brian. Marjorie was caught up in his enthusiasm and laughed wholeheartedly at his enjoyment. Somewhere small doubts niggled. What if Susie doesn't like me? What if this Brian child is a pest and I don't like him? But she brushed the doubts away in the extraordinary pleasure of Norman's company, in his undisguised joy in having Marjorie by his side.

The evening was a huge success. Susie was a tall awkward girl with fly-away hair, a face full of freckles and a wide full-lipped grin. She took Marjorie into the kitchen—"for company," she said—and put her to work shredding lettuce. She spoke seriously of her mother's long illness and gaily of the fun Brian had with his grandfather.

"Dad was lonely up there all by himself. I think he's done the right thing in moving here. And I'm glad he has his own place. Much as we love him, it wouldn't be good for him to live with us. He needs to make new friends. I can't tell you how excited he is about the Riverside Players. And about you, Marjorie."

Marjorie blushed with pleasure. How absurd, she thought. I haven't blushed since I was seventeen.

At seventeen, Marjorie, in her last year of high school, had been

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wakened one morning with the news that her parents had been killed in a highway accident. The memory was a dim one, hardly ever dredged up, of a gruff-voiced state trooper standing in the gray dawn at the door of the house. He wouldn't come in, but he stated his message and asked if he could call someone to help her.

Aunts had taken over, arranged things, sold the house, and Marjorie and Audrey were taken to live first with one and then the other until the insurance money ran out. Then it was politely suggested that they find other accommodations. Marjorie had by then gone to work for the travel agency, and when Audrey finished school a place was found for her too. It was all so long ago, so numbed by time. When had it not been numb, and why should it come back so painfully now?

"... been carrying on like a moonstruck puppy. Marjorie this and Marjorie that. And I'm glad for him." Susie laughed. "I guess I sound like a matchmaker, don't I? It's just that I haven't seen him happy in a long time. And I want you to know that however it turns out, I'm grateful to you for bringing him back to life."

Marjorie searched for words and was saved from answering by the entrance of Bob and Norman.

"It took a while, but Dad said it had to be a whiskey sour. I hope it's all right. We collaborated."

Bob presented the tray with a flourish and Marjorie took the glass gratefully. She sipped and pronounced the drink very good, but everyone laughed at the involuntary pucker that belied her words.

"Well, it is a bit on the sour side," she admitted.

"If you're going to hang around with us plain folks, you'll have to say what you mean." Norman put his arm around her shoulder and tipped her face up to meet his twinkling eyes. "And mean what you say."

The evening passed swiftly. When it was over and time to go, Marjorie could not have said what had happened to make her feel so different, so vulnerable. They had eaten Susie's fine meal, talked, laughed, and teased each other. Brian had appeared in his pajamas and attached himself to his grandfather's leg. He'd nodded solemnly at Marjorie and handed her his "Bun-Bun," a bedraggled rabbit with droopy fleece ears.

"Even Brian thinks you're special," announced Norman. "Back to bed, old man." Norman and Marjorie had tucked him back into his crib, and slipped "Bun-Bun" into the small curve of his arm..

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A perfectly ordinary evening, with perfectly ordinary people. Yet never before had Marjorie been so relaxed, so much at ease. With other men there had always been a tension, a sizing up, a fear of losing out on a good thing, or, worse yet, of encouraging a hopeless entanglement. With Norman there was only a warm acceptance and an ever-increasing feeling of well-being. Either Norman was different from anyone she'd ever known, or Marjorie had changed. Perhaps a little of both.

In the car going home, Marjorie suddenly sat bolt upright out of her peaceful reverie.

"My God! I forgot to call Audrey!"

"Who?"

"Audrey. My sister. I meant to tell her I wouldn't be home for dinner, and I forgot."

"Will she be worried?"

"I don't know. She must be sleeping now. She hasn't been feeling well."

"You never told me you had a sister."

"I haven't had a chance," Marjorie evaded. "Please hurry, Norman. I'll feel terrible if she's waiting up for me."

Norman's old car sped through the deserted streets. Marjorie sat silent and worried beside him.

When they neared the apartment building, Norman said, "Would you like me to come in with you and help you explain?"

"No," Marjorie answered quickly. "If she's upset, it wouldn't be a good time for you to meet her, and if she's asleep I don't want to wake her up. She'll probably be at rehearsal tomorrow."

Marjorie glanced up at the front of the building. There were no lights showing from her windows. She felt enormously relieved that she would not have to invent an explanation.

"I feel like a teenager out after curfew," she said.

"You look about sixteen right now," said Norman as he stopped the car.

Marjorie laughed a small self-conscious laugh. "It's the dim light. It'll do it every time."

Norman smiled and looked straight into her eyes. Marjorie tried to look away, but was held by what she read in his gaze—peace, a safe harbor, honest affection, love. Love? Marjorie shivered. Norman reached for her and Marjorie sank into his arms. He kissed her gently, and tears welled behind her closed lids. "I've come home," a voice within her exulted. "At last I've come home."

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"Tomorrow afternoon. Two o'clock." Marjorie could say no more.

"I'll be there." Norman leaped out of the car and opened the door for her.

"Good night," she said.

Norman seemed about to say something more, but instead he smiled, shook his head, and got back into his car.

Marjorie tried to open the apartment door quietly, but the key sounded like the crack of a pistol. She tiptoed into the dark apartment.

Audrey's voice stopped her in her tracks.

"Are you doing social work for senior citizens these days?"

"What?"

"Who's the 'ancient mariner?' I sincerely hope he's a wealthy old eccentric who drives a beat-up old car and keeps all his money invested in gilt-edged stocks. Just be sure he's not too tight to spend some of it on you."

"Audrey, it's not like that. Norman is—"

"Norman! What kind of name is Norman? The only Norman I ever knew was a cross-eyed kid who delivered newspapers."

"Audrey, please. Not now. I'm very tired." And suddenly she was very tired. Tired of the shallow self-interest by which they had guided their lives together; tired of the wasted years of picking people apart, of magnifying the faults of others and ignoring their virtues. But Audrey was not ready to let her off. She switched on the light and glared at Marjorie across the room.

"Why didn't you call me? Have you any idea how worried I was? I was just about to call the police. I've been standing by that window for hours wondering what to do."

"You didn't have to do that, Audrey. I can take care of myself."

"Take care of yourself! What did I just see out there? Do you call that taking care of yourself? Tell me that gray hair was just a trick of the moonlight. Tell me that old junk heap was a Cadillac in disguise. Go on, tell me."

"It's worse than even you can imagine," Marjorie flared. "Norman Jolly is a retired schoolteacher *and* a grandfather. And if he asks me, I'm going to marry him. Now I'm going to bed."

The next morning Audrey was subdued. The sisters breakfasted and scarcely a word passed between them. It was Marjorie's turn to do the laundry and she fled to the basement, leaving Audrey

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morosely pushing the vacuum cleaner. When she returned, Audrey was studying fabric swatches and comparing them with her costume sketches.

"Norman will be at rehearsal this afternoon."

"Will he?"

"He's going to do the lighting. Audrey, when you meet him, you'll understand."

"Will I?"

"Audrey, he's different. He's made me see things differently. I'm happier than I've ever been."

Audrey stared at her sister for a long moment. At length she said, "How nice."

The wedding was planned for the Saturday following the last performance of the play. Marjorie scheduled their honeymoon trip herself. First to Colorado to visit Norman's son and his wife, then on to San Francisco, which Marjorie had never seen but had always wanted to visit.

Audrey said, "I guess I'll be taking our winter cruise alone."

"Why don't you try something new for a change? Go skiing in Vermont. Or look, here's a tour of Mexico that might be fun." Marjorie waved a brochure.

"Old habits die hard," said Audrey. "I don't want to go alone."

Rehearsals went smoothly and the director complimented Marjorie on her characterization.

"You're positively regal, old girl. I don't know how you've done it, but you've brought more depth to this role than I suspected you had in you. You're going to be a grand old lady one of these days."

Marjorie smiled and Norman beamed. Audrey went silently about her work of making last-minute alterations and adjustments to the costumes. She had met Norman with reserve and had avoided him as much as possible.

"I think your sister resents me," Norman said during a break in rehearsal one evening. Audrey was sitting in a dark corner backstage gazing blankly at nothing.

"Maybe," Marjorie whispered. "She hasn't been feeling well. Headachy and not sleeping. But she's been to the doctor and he's given her some sleeping pills. She'll be all right."

After her first outburst Audrey had said nothing further against Norman. She seemed to be struggling with some inner turmoil but was not inclined to talk about it, and Marjorie attrib-

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uted it to disappointment with Marjorie for planning to marry so unworthy a person as Norman Jolly. Marjorie wished her sister could see Norman as she did, but she didn't press the issue.

Late one night, after the final dress rehearsal, Audrey said, "I don't suppose you two would consider moving in here?"

Marjorie glanced sharply at her sister. Audrey's face was haggard and her eyes looked bruised. She seemed to have lost weight. Marjorie worded her answer carefully.

"Norman has a house, Audrey. He's converted the garage into his hobby shop. I can't ask him to leave it."

"No, of course not. And I can't afford this place by myself."

"Have you thought about advertising for someone to share it with you?"

"I won't share my home with just anyone off the street." Audrey's voice cracked with suppressed pain. "We've been together since we were children. Do you think you can just walk out and expect me to get used to some stranger overnight?"

"I'm sorry, Audrey. I didn't think—" It was on the tip of her tongue to ask Audrey to move in with her and Norman. His house was small, but surely big enough for three. But she couldn't do it without consulting Norman.

"Never mind," Audrey said. "I'll just have to move into some dreary furnished room somewhere."

"Don't be silly. I don't need the furniture. You're welcome to it. And you'd be betther off in a smaller apartment closer to town. You know we don't fit in here any more."

"It isn't just the apartment. It's—well, I'll be alone. We've been together for so long. I don't know how I'll like living alone."

Marjorie felt an enormous wave of sympathy for her sister. She had hoped that the example of her own newly learned capacity for love would work a miracle for Audrey too. She put her hand on her sister's shoulder, feeling the quivering tenseness there.

"No one has to be alone, Audrey. You have to learn to let people into your life."

"So you say." Audrey opened a kitchen cabinet and took down her vial of sleeping pills. "Good night, dear sister."

The play opened to a rousing success and ran its full three weekends to packed houses. On the final night the director threw a party at his house and surprised everyone by producing a three-tiered wedding cake.

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"Since our young lovers are going to sneak out of town right after the wedding, we're having the reception before the fact. I hope it's not bad luck."

Norman and Marjorie cut the cake, a ragged chorus sang "Here Comes the Bride," and someone handed Marjorie a wilted bouquet of paper flowers which Marjorie threw directly at Audrey. Audrey caught it and smiled a tentative cautious smile as if her face were made of china and might crack. After that Audrey joined the festivity, talked and laughed, drank perhaps a little too much, and seemed as cheerful as anyone else. The party straggled off into the sunrise and Audrey was among the last to leave. Marjorie was glad to see her enjoying herself.

The wedding was set for Saturday. In the intervening week Marjorie shopped, packed, and made final arrangements. Audrey helped her with good grace, and bought a new dress for herself as maid of honor. The ceremony would take place in the minister's study. Susie's Bob would be best man.

"I'm glad you're feeling better," said Marjorie.

"Yes, I am," said Audrey, "and I hope you and Norman will be very, very happy."

On the Thursday evening before the wedding, Norman had one final business trip to make. He had learned of a collection of HO trains that was for sale in a small town about 200 miles to the north. After prolonged negotiation by telephone, the owner had agreed on a price and Norman planned to drive up Thursday night, pick up the trains on Friday morning and be back by Friday afternoon.

"Let me cook dinner for you before you go," said Audrey.

Marjorie was delighted that Audrey had come round, and Norman needed no urging to accept. "But I'll have to leave right after dinner. It's a four-hour drive and I don't want to get too tired."

"That's all right," said Audrey. "Marjorie and I have lots to do before the big day."

On Thursday afternoon Audrey left work early.

"I need to do some shopping," she said. "And I want everything to be perfect. You're not to lift a finger, Marjorie. This is my treat for you and Norman. He really is a nice person."

Marjorie's happiness was complete. If Audrey could only realize how wrong-headed they both had been, if she could only be a little less calculating, she might find such happiness for herself. And it looked as if she was on the way.

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When Norman and Marjorie arrived, Audrey was busy in the kitchen. The dining table was set with candles and a small centerpiece of sweetheart roses. Audrey popped her head out. Her cheeks were flushed and she was smiling.

"Just sit down and relax, folks. I'll bring you a drink in a minute. Something different. A Negroni."

"I don't know if I ought to drink," said Norman. "I've got a long drive ahead of me."

"Oh, just one. It won't hurt. And then we have Chicken Kiev and fresh asparagus. A light meal so it won't make you sleepy."

Audrey disappeared back into the kitchen.

"I can hardly believe the change that's come over her," said Norman.

"Yes. Isn't it wonderful! And she's found a nice apartment downtown. She'll be near everything. Promise me, Norman, that we won't shut her out of our lives. She dreads being alone."

"She'll have more family now than she's ever had."

"Here we are," said Audrey. She carried two pinkish drinks in her hands. "Here's yours, Marjorie, and this is yours, Norman. They're a little bitter-tasting, but that's the Campari. Have you ever tasted Campari, Norman?"

"No, I don't think I ever have."

"Well, I have to get back to the finishing touches." She skipped back to the kitchen.

"Not bad," said Norman after the first sip.

Back in the kitchen, Audrey put some butter over a slow flame to melt. The salad was ready, the asparagus almost done. The chicken was perfect. And for dessert, a lemon meringue pie—Norman's favorite.

Audrey smiled as she tidied up the kitchen. She washed the paring knife and put it away. She wiped the counter clean. And she placed the vial of sleeping pills back in the cupboard. There were still two left. She could get some more tomorrow.

"Maybe I'm marrying the wrong sister," said Norman an hour later. "Anybody who can make a lemon meringue pie like that one deserves to be kissed."

He rose from the table and did just that. Audrey laughed and said, "Be careful, Marjorie, or I'll steal him away from you."

"I hate to eat and run, girls. But I really should be on my way." Norman took Audrey's hand. "Thank you, Audrey. I know it's

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been difficult for you, but you're not really losing your sister. We'll have lots of happy times together."

"I'm sure we will," said Audrey, smiling warmly.

Marjorie went with Norman to the door and Audrey began clearing the table. The sisters washed the dishes together.

"Just two more nights," said Audrey. "Then you'll be gone."

"I'm so tired," said Marjorie. "Can't keep my eyes open. I can finish the packing tomorrow. I think I'll go right to bed."

"Must be all the excitement," said Audrey.

Marjorie woke early. It had always been her habit to shower and put the coffee on before waking Audrey. This morning was no different. She plugged in the coffee pot and switched on the radio. The announcer's voice filtered through her thoughts of tomorrow and all the days to come.

"... in a highway accident late last night. Witnesses said the car began swerving in and out of its lane before crossing the median and crashing head-on into an oncoming trailer truck. It seemed as though the driver had suffered a heart attack or fallen asleep at the wheel. Dead at the scene was Norman Jolly, 55, of this city. The driver of the truck is listed in fair condition at—"

A numbness enveloped Marjorie like a freezing shroud. She could only breathe in shallow gasps. Her lips framed a name, but she could make no sound. Her legs felt huge and leaden, her head seemed to be floating to the ceiling. She shivered spasmodically and fell to the floor. Far away the telephone rang...

The icy shroud covered her face and cold wetness trickled down her neck.

"Marjorie! Marjorie! Can you get up?"

Hands plucked at her. The voice commanded her attention.

"Marjorie! Can you make it to your bed?"

Her own arm moved and her hand pulled the wet towel away from her face. She scrambled clumsily to her feet.

"That's the way. Easy does it. Susie just called and told me. Oh, Marjorie, it's terrible! She's been down at the morgue. She wants you to call her."

"No." Marjorie lurched toward her bedroom, stumbled past her suitcases, and fell onto her bed.

"That's all right then, dear. Just lie down. I'll take care of you."

"Audrey?" Marjorie's voice was faint and muffled in her throat. "Don't leave me."

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"I won't leave you."

"Audrey? Can I have one of your sleeping pills?"

The sisters are inseparable.

They live together and work together. They wear each other's clothes and cook neat little meals for each other. Once a year they take a cruise together. And if one runs out of sleeping pills, the other will share hers.

But sometimes Audrey's eyes glitter and her jaw juts at the memory of things past. And sometimes Marjorie's eyes widen and swim with wonder at the memory of things that might have been. These memories they do not share. There are some things that cannot be shared with anyone.

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a *NEW* crime story by ROBERT EDWARD ECKELS

Andrews' parole officer said, "They made a movie about him once." Of course his name was changed, but it was Andrews all right—Andrews, perhaps the greatest con-man of his time.

The head of the Organization said, "But with Andrews involved you can bet there's bound to be a payoff somewhere." And a very clever payoff it turned out to be. . .

THE LAST OF THE BREED

by ROBERT EDWARD ECKELS

Andrews sat quietly at the desk while his parole officer went over his papers.

"Actually," Cummings said, "you were due here yesterday. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes," Andrews said. He was a tall, almost painfully thin man with a long narrow face and sad spaniel eyes. His hands were long and narrow too and he used one now to gesture expressively. "It was unavoidable. It won't happen again."

"No," Cummings said. He looked searchingly at the other man. "Well, we won't make an issue of it. This time." He turned back to his papers. "You have a place to stay?"

Andrews nodded and gave the address. It was a roominghouse on the near north side. Cummings noted it down. "Under the circumstances," he said, "we'll dispense with a lot of the usual restrictions, but don't move without letting me know first."

"I won't," Andrews said. Cummings put his pencil down and leaned back in his chair. Suddenly he looked a lot less official.

"You have any family, Frank?" he said.

Andrews shrugged. "A daughter. In California."

Cummings nodded slowly. "You know," he said, "if you want, we can transfer your file. Let you spend your time out there."

Andrews shrugged again. "What's the point?" he said. "She has problems enough without having to cope with me. I have a small grandson," he added. "I've never seen him. Neither did his father before he was killed in Vietnam."

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Cummings didn't say anything. There was a framed photograph of two young children on his desk. Andrews rose to go.

"What do I do about reporting?"

"Just call in," Cummings said. "You know the rules." He watched Andrews leave, then got up to put the file back in its place in the cabinet.

Marcia Henderson who had the desk next to his came over to stand beside him. She was very young, barely into her twenties, and had just been graduated from the state university with a degree in social work.

"Was that really Frank Andrews?" she said.

Cummings nodded. "Really and truly."

"Gee. He looked old."

"He is old." Cummings sighed. "The last of the breed," he said. "They made a movie about him once. I forget what they called it *and they changed all the names, of course, but it was about him* all right." He shoved the file drawer closed.

Marcia shook her head. "And just look at him now," she said. "What do they give him? Six months?"

"Something like that." Cummings looked thoughtfully at the doorway through which Andrews had just passed. "But before you get to feeling too sorry for him, remember this: Frank Andrews has spent most of his adult life conning people out of one thing or another. And he might just be conning us now."

The city had changed considerably in the years Andrews had been away. But some things wouldn't, he knew, and one of them was Shorty's pool hall. It was still where it had always been and empty this early in the day except for Shorty himself, racking balls in anticipation of more activity later.

He looked up as Andrews came in, then hurried forward grinning. "Hey," he said, "look who's here." He grasped Andrews' hand and pumped it hard. "Same old Frank," he said. "Looking good as ever."

"That's a lie," Andrews said, smiling. "But thanks for saying it anyway, Shorty."

Shorty's face reddened. Then he said quickly, "What brings you out this early in the morning anyway, Frank?"

"I need a stake."

"Sure," Shorty said. He reached for his wallet. "Just say how much."

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"Five thousand dollars," Andrews said.

Shorty's hand stopped. His face reddened in a different way. Andrews smiled faintly. "I'm good for it, Shorty," he said.

"Aw, I know that, Frank," Shorty said. He shrugged awkwardly. "But—well, the truth is times have changed. I don't have that kind of money any more and the only way I can get it is through the Organization. And, honest to God, Frank, those are guys you don't want to get mixed up with. Not if you can help it."

Andrews' face didn't change. "I won't need it more than a couple of days, Shorty."

Shorty shrugged again. "All right," he said. "As long as you know what you're getting into." He looked up out of the corners of his eyes. "You got something in mind, huh, Frank?"

Andrews nodded soberly. "Redeeming a misspent life," he said.

For a moment after he left the pool hall Andrews' face lost its usual air of calm assurance and looked drawn and haggard. They'd told him he'd tire more and more easily, but he hadn't expected it to be this bad, and for the first time he began to be afraid. What if he couldn't pull it off? But then the pain passed and with it the moments of self-doubt.

He picked up his stride again and went on as jauntily as before. Shorty, watching from the pool-hall window, shook his head slowly and went back to make his phone call.

"Who's the money for, Shorty?" Minor said. He was a slender young man, dressed as usual in an impeccably tailored suit. No amount of tailoring, though, could change his eyes. They were cold and hard—hood's eyes—and they made Shorty nervous.

"Frank Andrews," Shorty said.

Minor exchanged glances with his companion, an older stocky man in a tight-fitting jacket who worried Shorty even more than Minor. The stocky man didn't say anything. Minor looked down at his fingernails. "Andrews used to have a pretty fair reputation as a con artist," he said quietly, speaking to Shorty.

Shorty shook his head. "You don't have to worry about that," he said. "I've known Frank a lot of years and one thing he's never done is cheat a friend."

"That was then," Minor said. "This is now. Maybe he's changed."

"So what do I do?" Shorty said. He looked from one to the other.

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"Tell him no?" He almost hoped they'd say yes, but the stocky man shook his head.

"No," he said, "you give him the money. And then you pray you're right."

Shorty counted the money out carefully, then slipped it back into its envelope. "It'll cost you a hundred for the rest of the week," he said. "After that the usual vigorish applies."

"I understand," Andrews said. He took the envelope and put it in his jacket pocket.

Shorty looked at him earnestly. "I wasn't kidding about those guys either," he said. "You watch yourself. Okay, Frank?"

"Sure, Shorty," Andrews said. He smiled, clapped the other on the shoulder, and went out.

Outside, the rental car was parked where he had left it. So was the green coupe that had followed him from the roominghouse. It followed again now as he pulled away from the curb, and for a moment Andrews thought it might be a plainclothes man. But a closer look through his rear-view mirror at a stop light convinced him it wasn't. No detective ever dressed that expensively, not on duty anyway. But who else then? The most likely candidate was one of Shorty's guys watching and protecting his investment.

Andrews smiled faintly to himself. It would be easy enough to lose him. But on the other hand it just might put the Organization's doubts to rest if he let them see where he was going. And with that in mind he drove sedately down three more blocks, then turned into a parking lot.

The sign over the entrance read Madison Bank and Trust Company.

"Let me see if I understand this," the voice on the other end of the line said. "You spent the whole day following him from one bank to another?"

"That's right," Minor said. It was hot in the booth and he was sweating slightly. "Ten in all. Fortunately, we have connections with a couple, so I was able to get a line on what he was doing. And you aren't going to believe this. He was borrowing money."

"From the banks?"

"Every one," Minor said. "And this is the part you really aren't going to believe. He didn't make a penny on the deal."

"You mean they all turned him down?"

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"No. They didn't all turn him down. In fact, none of them did. But then banks don't lend money without some kind of security—not to people like Frank Andrews anyway. So at the first bank he went to he used our $5000 to open a savings account, then put the passbook up as collateral for a $5000 loan. That's not unusual. Or so our banker tells me anyway. A lot of people borrow even when they have funds of their own. Some just want to protect the interest accruing on their accounts. Others—"

"Spare me the lecture," the man on the other end said. "Just tell me about Andrews."

"Yeah. Sure. Well, anyway, then at the second bank he used the five thousand he'd borrowed from the first bank to open a second savings account which he then put up as security on a second $5000 loan. And so on through all ten banks."

"He didn't pyramid or build up the amount as he went along?"

"He didn't do a thing," Minor said. "The savings account balanced the loan every time. So no matter how you slice it, he started out with $5000 and he ended up with $5000."

"Plus a lot of bank accounts and loans in between," the man on the other end said. He sounded thoughtful. "Any way he can get his hands on that money?"

Minor shook his head even though the other couldn't see him. "Not a chance," he said. "The loan officer kept his passbook every time. And without a passbook and with the bank records marked to show it's security for a loan, that money's frozen tighter than if it was in ice."

"Yeah," the man on the other end said. "But with Andrews involved you can bet there's bound to be a payoff somewhere. So keep an eye on him, and who knows? Maybe there'll be something in it for us yet."

"Yeah," Minor said, grinning wolfishly.

Andrews returned the money plus the $100 vigorish to Shorty in the same envelope it had come in. "I told you I wouldn't need it long," he said.

"So you did," Shorty said. He sounded relieved. "Everything worked out all right then."

"Everything worked out just fine." Andrews put out his hand. "It's been good knowing you, Shorty," he said.

"Aw, gee, Frank, we'll be seeing each other again. You know—"

Andrews shook his head. "No," he said.

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Shorty smiled wryly and took the outstretched hand. "I wish it was different, Frank."

"So do I," Andrews said and went out to his car. As he pulled away from the curb he noted the green coupe was still with him and smiled to himself again. This time he would really put their minds to rest.

Two hours later he was headed north on the highway out of town. It was full dark now, but his headlights picked up the bicyclist wobbling across the road in plenty of time. He hesitated just a fraction of a second, then closed his eyes, and without giving himself a chance to think further swung the wheel hard to the right.

The pain was unbelievable when he smashed into the abutment, but it only lasted a moment . . .

Marcia Henderson leaned over Cummings' shoulder and read the clipping on his desk. It was early the following morning and the business of the day hadn't really begun yet. "It just goes to show, doesn't it?" she said. "You never know, do you?"

Cummings looked up at her curiously.

"What I mean is," she said, "here's this man everybody expects to die in six months. They even let him out of prison just so he can die in peace and dignity, and then he's wiped out in an automobile accident. So you just never know."

"No," Cummings said, "I guess you don't." He put the clipping in with the rest of Andrews' papers and filed them away. Case closed. Somehow, though, he couldn't quite shake the feeling that somewhere—wherever he was—Andrews was having the last laugh on them all.

He would have been sure of it if he'd known about the letter Andrews mailed off just before he drove out of town, but then, of course, he never did. The letter read:

Dear Mary,

By the time you receive this I will be dead. That's a hell of a melodramatic way to start off, I know. But, unfortunately, it's true. I have only a couple of months at the most and all the doctors can offer is to make me "comfortable" at the end. Somehow that holds little appeal and I hope you won't blame me for choosing my own way out. It will be quick at least and for those who worry about such things convincingly accidental.

I doubt very much that very many will miss me. I was a poor

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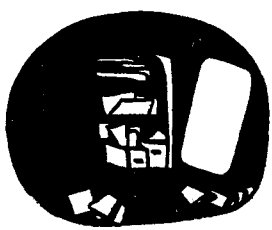
husband to your mother and a worse father to you. It wasn't that I didn't love you. I did and I do, but I couldn't change what I was. What I am, really, because even now I'm still working the same side of the street I always have. The only difference is that this time I won't be around for the payoff. You will, though, and that's the real reason I'm writing you.

What I've done, put quite simply, is borrow money from ten banks. I've also drawn up my will naming you my sole heir and beneficiary. I realize on the surface that appears as if all I have to leave you is a lot of unpaid debts. But there's enough on deposit in each of the ten banks to cover the debt and I'm sure all of them will be quick to claim it once they learn of my death.

In any case, it's to your benefit to be sure they do. Because there's a kicker, and very simply again it's that when banks lend you money these days they also offer you insurance for the face value of the loan. They call it loan insurance, but it's really good old-fashioned declining-balance term life insurance. It's also the only life insurance you can buy at my age without a physical examination. So even after you pay off whatever interest charges there are on the loans, you'll still have the better part of $50,000 left for you and the boy. Think of me when you spend it.

Love,
Your father



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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 453rd "first story" to be publiished by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . a real chuckler . . .

The author, Douglas Shea, "is a resident of Linwood, New Jersey, and is in the real estate business. He has some background in science and math. His interests include classical music (especially Rachmaninoff), bird study, and antiquities. This story came to be written in a three-day period as relief from the tension of final editing and typing of a book manuscript in an entirely different genre that has since been submitted for consideration."

Dear Mr. Shea: please send us more!

ADVICE, UNLIMITED

by DOUGLAS SHEA

Mr. Gihon Gore
c/o Chutney & Chives, Inc., Publishers
New York, N.Y.
Dear Mr. Gore:

Although your mystery stories have not been exactly unheard of by me, last week was the first occasion I had to pick one up and read it. I am speaking of *Brent's First Case.* Generally speaking I found the book adequate but there were two errors in Chapter 21. You speak of the killer African bees navigating to the bedroom of elderly pig-iron heiress Harriet Heald (a) by polarized light from the sky and (b) by being attracted to the interior of the bedroom by the phlox-scented room-freshener spray used by Miss Heald. I'll take the easy one first.

Bees are *never* attracted to phlox, Mr. Gore. Their tongues are too short to reach the nectar deeply buried within the flowers. The bees know this and you might say that they wouldn't even stick out their tongues (ha, ha) at phlox scent. Try cyclamen scent. Your bees will go bananas over that one.

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Now about that polarized light bit. It is true that bees do navigate by polarized light from the sky but never (I repeat, *never*) on cloudy days. You have to have blue sky in order to detect polarized light at certain angles to the sun. Cloud particles destroy the effect by scattering the light.

What to do? The cloudy day seems necessary in order to give Miss Heald her attack of sinus migraine, an attack which brings old Dr. Physick tottering to her bedside so that they can be killed by bee venom together. On the other hand, if the sun isn't shining, forget the polarized light.

Thinking the matter through, I believe that skilled replotting of Chapters 21, 22, 23, and 24 might turn the trick. You might want to consider this in your next edition of *Brent's First Case.*

Very truly yours,
George Ohm
Associate Professor of Science
Dimwiddie University
Glen Cove, L.I., N.Y.

From: Quentin Quarles, Editor
Chutney & Chives, Inc., Publishers
New York, N.Y.

As Mr. Gore now receives several thousand items of mail a year, it is not possible for him to answer you personally. Hence this form letter designed to answer 95% of the questions he is asked.

His home address is Waldorf Towers, New York, N.Y.; his London office c/o Cratchit and Marley, Solicitors, 54 Dewlap Road, London N22, 4PP.

Biographical details will be found in *Who's Who, Contemporary Authors, Contemporary Novelists, Dictionary of International Biography, Celebrity Register, Britannica 3.* See also profile in *Time* of September 12, 1972.

Mr. Gore has now written 37 books. See above references, or the list in any recent edition.

Permission to quote should be directed to Chutney & Chives, Inc.

Mr. Gore *never* supplies photos or autographs. Also he cannot autograph and mail back books.

Lecture requests are no longer accepted. Nor can questions be answered about how to plot good mystery stories. The only advice he can give to beginners is this: Read, read, read. Read at least

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one book a day. Also write, write, write. And remember one thing about getting fresh ideas: there is no substitute for living. As Ernest Hemingway said, "Writing is not a full-time occupation."

Mr. Quentin Quarles, Editor
Chutney & Chives, Inc., Publishers
New York, N.Y.
Dear Quentin, Quentin, Quentin:

I return your form letter herewith, having studied it carefully. I took your advice, Quentin: you told me to read, read, read, and to write, write, write.

Please refer to page 209 of *The Case of the Undertaker's Hat.* See where Gore sends the hemophiliac crashing through a thin sheet of invisible glass blocking the garden path? Another no-no, Quentin. Fact is, there's no such thing as "invisible" glass. Gore means nonreflective glass, sometimes called invisible glass by tyros. Such glasses have the light that they would reflect at normal incidence almost completely suppressed by interference.

But the condition for said destructive interference can be fulfilled for only one wave length. This is usually chosen to be near the middle of the visible spectrum. The reflection of red and violet light is then somewhat larger and these two colors combine to form purple.

Take a look at a coated lens in a camera. See the purplish hue? A sheet of glass that color across anybody's path would stand out like your ears, ears, ears, old friend. No matter what wave length you try to suppress, others will be reflected. And that's the name of the game. That seems to knock out Chapters 11 and 12, also pages 209 through 218, also Chapters 23, 24, and 25. I don't know how you fix up *that* mess. Sorry about that.

George Ohm

Mr. Quentin Quarles, Editor
Chutney & Chives, Inc., Publishers
New York, N.Y.
Dear Quentin:

Where are you? I miss those little inspirational words of yours.

Incidentally, I found some more boo-boos—in *The Slim Man.* Say please and I'll tell you what they are. Pretty please, Quentin?

George Ohm

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Memo: From the suite of Gihon Gore
To: George Ohm

Get lost.

Gihon Gore

GG : Louise L'Erotique
cc : Quentin Quarles

Memo: From George Ohm
To: Gihon Gore

I have your little note. Gore, you need help and I'm here to give it to you. Let's begin with *The Slim Man.*

In one scene you have The Slim Man, astronomer Herschel Skyanier, look through the eyepiece of the Hale Telescope on Palomar Mountain while the tube of the instrument is lowered for routine inspection. If I read you correctly, and I believe I do, Skyanier thereby witnesses a murder being committed five miles down the mountain slope. Gore, there's so much wrong with that that I hardly know where to begin—but I'll try.

In the first place, you can't even deflect the tube of a modern astronomical telescope to the horizon, let alone point it down a mountain slope. Take a look at a picture of any observatory anywhere in the world, Gore. Notice the position of the slit in the dome. In the case of the Hale Telescope of which you write, the floor on which the mounting of the instrument rests is 75 feet below the level of the slit. What I'm saying is that with one of these big babies you can only look up at the sky—never down.

And another thing: the field of view of any large telescope is so small that even if you could look at a murderer five miles away about all you'd see would be a nose or an eyebrow. Finally, Gore, the image would be *inverted.* You see, they don't bother with erecting eyepieces on astronomical telescopes. It's an absolutely unnecessary refinement. Ask yourself the question: what's up, what's down in the case of the heavenly bodies? and you'll have the answer why.

You slipped up badly in *The Slim Man*, Gore. Tonight I'm going to riffle through *The Affair at Byles* to see if I can be of use to you there. Don't lose heart.

Yours for Science.

George Ohm

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Mr. Gihon Gore
Waldorf Towers
New York, N.Y.
Dear Mr. Gore:

You have scarcely had time to digest the information I sent you re *The Slim Man,* but I wanted you to know that I have finished *The Affair at Byles* and I think we are in *real* trouble this time.

As you tell it, Thedabara Gam, spoiled, filthy rich heiress to the Gam millions, is giving a lawn party at Byles, her family estate, for a small gathering of 200 persons come to honor her engagement to Herman Opdyke, polo-playing scion of her father's business associate. Meanwhile, unbeknown to all, Shamus McGillicuddy, Miss Gam's jilted ex-suitor, just back from the Amazon, has secreted himself in the third cook's tent, murder burning in his black heart.

At an opportune moment McGillicuddy sticks the tip of an Orinoco blowgun through the tent fly and lets Opdyke have it full in the chest with a curare-dipped dart. In the resulting confusion he thereupon escapes through the back of the tent, disguised as an attendant bearing a tray of petits four, ladyfingers, and strawberry preserves.

Oh, this is dreadful! How shall I begin?

Item Number One. Curare is a highly unreliable poison, its toxicity varying greatly with its source and method of preparation. See *The Merck Index* or any of the several pharmacopoeias. More than that, curare isn't nearly strong enough or quick-acting enough. I myself would prefer to use sodium cyanide. Sodium cyanide is freely soluble in water. It can also be readily obtained since it is widely used in extracting gold and silver ores, in electroplating baths, in fumigating citrus and other fruit trees, and in disinfecting ships, railroad cars, warehouses, etc. Only four to eight grams of this chemical would prove lethal to a horse.

Dissolve a thimbleful of the crystals in a tablespoonful of water when your murderer is ready to go and you've got it made. Have him carry the solution to the scene of the crime in a small plastic-capped vial. The victim who receives a shot of this will die in seconds.

Item Number Two. The blowgun. Do you have any idea how long an Orinoco Indian blowgun is? Well, it would reach from the ground almost to a man's armpit. Try sawing it off to a more

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practical length and you destroy its accuracy. How did McGillicuddy carry that monstrosity to Byles?—tucked down his pants' leg and up his shirt? Really, Gore, you'd have a veritable stiff before you ever got to the murder.

May I suggest replacing the blowgun with a tranquilizing gun and a tranquilizing dart? It seems so obvious to me.

Yours for Science.

George Ohm

Look, Ohm:

I've had you pegged for some time. You're a medical school dropout with a useless smattering of sixth-grade science. You have such a gnawing sense of inferiority that it gives you a compulsion to pester famous people with your paranoic prattle. If Einstein were living, I'll swear you would be deluging him with a one-sided tirade about his mistakes in the theory of relativity.

Now don't bother me any further with your puerile disquisitions, Ohm.

Be sure you hang onto my letters, though. The autographs may bring you a buck or two when you come to a decrepit old age.

Gihon Gore

GG : Louise L'Erotique

Dear Mr. Gore:

"Puerile disquisitions," eh? Hoity-toity now!

As for saving your letters, be informed that I use them for a very special purpose. I do find that 20-pound bond paper a little abrasive, though. How much would you want to switch to a 9-pound weight?

Well, Gore, I've prayed with you and I've wrestled in spirit with you and I finally see that I've wasted my time. *En garde* now, Gore!

I see you don't know about my fall and winter Saturday night lectures on popular science. Yes, pompous one, I circulate up and down a good part of the Atlantic seaboard, stopping off at many of the smaller colleges where I have an invitation to speak. I kick off this season's series this coming Saturday night right here in Peter Piper Hall at good old Dimwiddie.

Guess what this season's topic is, Gore? "Scientific Boo-boos in the Works of a Famous Mysterymonger." Do you like the title? Well, guess who I'm going to talk about?

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Do you know how popular you are on college campuses, Gore?—almost as popular as Tolkien with his Hobbit stories. Think of the rage and disgust of all those students when the word starts to pass that their idol has typewriter keys of clay.

I'll bury you, buster!

Yours for Science.

George Ohm

INTERIM REPORT

From: Seymour Kravitz, Detective
To: Inspector Attilan Hund, Homicide
(on cassette tape)

I arrived at Peter Piper Hall, Dimwiddie University, at 8:52 P.M. approximately 25 minutes after the commission of the crime. The body of the victim, George Ohm, white, 34, had not been touched, being still in place on the platform where it had fallen. Death was due to a hypodermic dart which still protruded from the upper left quadrant of the victim's chest. The Medical Examiner reports that the dart, of the type used to tranquilize animal subjects, had been filled with a concentrated aqueous solution of either potassium or sodium cyanide. (Details later on receipt of report of analysis from Departmental chemist.)

A quick-witted student, Gary Cooper Rabinowitz, white, 21, had taken temporary charge pending my arrival and no one had left the theater.

"A Chinese detective with a Jewish name!" exclaimed Gary when I introduced myself. "Welcome, *landsman*!"

"Yes. And you should be a good Jewish boy and help me further so that we may find the murderer and give him such a hurt that he will pray for the death of ten thousand tickling nightingales' tongues."

My words seemed to strike a responsive chord in Gary who I later learned is an exchange student from Sweden.

There were 47 persons in the theater—36 students and 11 senior citizens who excitedly explained to me that they were receiving Social Security benefits and didn't want any further trouble with the government. All 47 persons were eventually released.

The theater is a small one, seating approximately 300 persons. The front platform on which Ohm was standing is elevated about three feet above floor level. Entry to the theater is gained by means of two sets of double doors, right and left, leading in from a

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spacious corridor. Between the two entrances is a single door leading to a projection booth. As seen from within the theater, the projection booth is a mat-black boxlike structure closed on three sides except for the usual small projection ports which in this case are about eight feet above theater floor level.

An important witness was Willie Crumble, black, 21, who was sitting in the center of the theater two rows from the back and just under the line of sight from the projection ports. Willie was anxiously awaiting the arrival of his girl friend and kept turning and glancing toward first one entrance, then the other. Willie is prepared to swear that no one entered or left the theater after Professor Ohm—Associate Professor of Science at the institution—began to speak.

Only about a half dozen sentences of Ohm's lectures were delivered when the tragedy occurred. No one knows the import of the lecture except that it had to do with technical or scientific mistakes in the writing of mystery fiction. No notes were found, either on the platform or in Ohm's bachelor apartment.

According to a majority of witnesses, Ohm had just uttered the partial sentence, "And so tonight I want to tell you about—" when there was a very faint *throop* sound whose point of origin in the theater could not be determined. Ohm fell backward, flung his arms wide, and emitted a single unintelligible guttural groan that sounded like *Gorrr-r-r*! And that was it. He died immediately after.

Ohm seems to have been a man of catholic tastes. On the night stand beside his bed were three paperbacks by Mickey Spillane; in the library-study the complete set of Beilstein's *Organische Chemie*. Over the desk hung framed pictures of Olga Korbut and Thomas A. Edison. He evidently had no enemies, according to the consensus of all students interviewed.

You know my methods, Inspector. I was able to deduce that the lethal dart had come from one of the two projection ports and such indeed proved to be the case. The booth door in the corridor was secured, but I was easily able to open it with a picklock. Inside I found a dart gun on the floor just under the right port. Against it was propped a 3-by-5-inch unlined white index card bearing the legend in block letters: STOLEN FROM THE NASSAU COUNTY SPCA. PLEASE RINSE THOROUGHLY AND RETURN.

According to our handwriting expert the card was lettered by a right-handed person using his left hand. No fingerprints were

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found anywhere except for some smudged repetitions on the cylindrical sides of the projection lenses, obviously accumulated there by the projectionist. There was a faint fragrance of Brut cologne pervading the air.

There was a curious circular smudge on the end of the dart gun barrel and I was almost immediately able to deduce what it was. The gun was used with an appurtenance which had been tossed or had rolled into one corner. It is probably the first time in history that a tranquilizer gun was used with a silencer.

Inspector, there is really nothing by which to get hold of this case. The Saturday night cultural events at the University are largely informal affairs, no admission being charged, and it is this very informality that allowed the murderer to come and go as he chose.

The homicide itself has the simple line that marks the hand of a master. Hsi Tz'u Chuan says that what is easy is easy to know; what is simple is easy to follow. One part of me wants to believe this—to keep delving and triumph—but another part remembers what the Talmud says: Much talk, much foolishness.

Inspector Hund, I reluctantly have to report to you that at last we seem to have stumbled on The Perfect Crime.

"Q"

CURRENT MYSTERY AND SUSPENSE HARDCOVERS

AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	PRICE	ON SALE
Dominic, R. B.	MURDER OUT OF COMMISSION	Doubleday & Co., Inc.	$5.95	11/12
Foley, Rae	PUT OUT THE LIGHT	Dodd, Mead & Co.	6.95	11/76
Fremlin, Celia	THE LONG SHADOW	Doubleday & Co., Inc.	5.95	11/5
Harper, David	THE HANGED MEN	Dodd, Mead & Co.	7.95	11/76
McShane, Mark	LASHED, BUT NOT LEASHED	Doubleday & Co., Inc.	5.95	11/26
Marric, J. J.	GIDEON'S DRIVE	Harper & Row	7.95	11/24

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 454th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . The author's full name is Sharon Nancy Farber. She is in her early thirties, was born and raised in San Francisco, has a B.A. from the University of California at Santa Cruz, and is now studying chemistry at Cal State College Sonoma. She lives on a quarter horse ranch in Sebastopol, a town noted only as the home of the Gravenstein apple. Her hobbies include reading, drawing, playing fetch with her dog, punning (see her first story), and working as a volunteer ambulance attendant . . .

THE GREAT DORMITORY MYSTERY

by S. N. FARBER

After the third murder in as many months of residents on the fourth floor of the dormitory, the Great Detective was called in on the case.

In each death the body of a student had been discovered the next morning crushed and covered with tire marks. "The halls are wide enough for a small car, but the elevator and stairwells are not," the baffled campus security chief said. "But how did the car get to the fourth floor?"

"Have you observed," the Great Detective replied, "that the tragic events coincided with a full moon? I believe we are dealing with that unhappy curse of modern technological society—the descendant of the werewolf, the weremobile."

On the next night that the moon was full, the Great Detective took action. Every student who lived on the fourth floor was locked in a separate room, along with an electrically monitored five-gallon can of gasoline.

Toward the middle of the night the instruments reported the disappearance of five gallons of gas in Room 440, which was oc-

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cupied by a Japanese-American youth named Nagawa.

"He must be pouring the gasoline out," the security chief said.

"Or drinking it!" said the Great Detective. He led the security chief to Room 440, where they peered through the keyhole. Nagawa was no longer there, and in his place was a shiny compact car.

The next morning the Great Detective confronted Nagawa. "When the moon is full, you become an automobile, and you ran over your fellow students on the fourth floor."

"But how did you know?" gasped Nagawa.

"Alimentary, my were-Datsun."

"Q"

THE ARABIC NUMERAL MYSTERY

The Case of the 10 Suspects

by JOANNA L. ESTEP

Who is the guilty party?

It can't be **1**—he's too upstanding and straight.

Or **2** who starts out crooked, but straightens out in the end.

3 is a possible suspect, but anyone so curvy isn't too likely a prospect.

4 is close-mouthed, but an upright sort.

5 starts out well, but gets round in the end—not much of a threat there.

6 is a nice easy-going character, not like **7** who is stiff and unbending.

8 is a real dumpling of a figure, but he's not much of a suspect.

Certainly **9** has a good head on his shoulders.

No. **0** must be the guilty one—there's nothing straight about him at all.

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a detective-crime story by

AGATHA CHRISTIE

One of the best of Agatha Christie's nonseries stories, and one that might be called "The Compleat Mystery." Its ingredients include suspense, detection, crime, adventure, humor—almost every component of the genre except the hardboiled and the supernatural . . . Yes, humor—"crime with a laugh," as James Nelson once expressed it; and "murder without tears," as Will Cuppy phrased it so aptly . . .

MR. EASTWOOD'S ADVENTURE

by AGATHA CHRISTIE

Mr. Eastwood looked at the ceiling. Then he looked down at the floor. From the floor his gaze traveled slowly up the right-hand wall. Then, with a sudden stern effort, he focused his gaze once more on the typewriter before him.

The virgin white of the sheet of paper was defaced by a title written in capital letters.

"THE MYSTERY OF THE SECOND CUCUMBER," so it ran. A pleasing title. Anthony Eastwood felt that anyone reading that title would be at once intrigued and arrested by it. "The Mystery of the Second Cucumber," they would say. "What *can* that be about? A *cucumber?* The second *cucumber?* I must certainly read that story." And they would be thrilled and charmed by the consummate ease with which this master of detective fiction had woven an exciting plot round this simple vegetable.

That was all very well. Anthony Eastwood knew as well as anyone what the story ought to be like—the bother was that somehow or other he couldn't get on with it. The two essentials for a story were a title and a plot—the rest was mere spadework; sometimes the title led to a plot all by itself, as it were, and then all was plain sailing, but in this case the title continued to adorn the top of the page, and not the vestige of a plot was forthcoming.

Copyright 1924 by Agatha Christie; copyright renewed. Originally titled "The Mystery of the Spanish Shawl."

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Again Anthony Eastwood's gaze sought inspiration from the ceiling, the floor, and the wallpaper, and still nothing materialized.

"I shall call the heroine Sonia," said Anthony, to urge himself on. "Sonia or possibly Dolores—she shall have a skin of ivory pallor—the kind that's not due to ill health, and eyes like fathomless pools. The hero shall be called George, or possibly John—something short and British. Then the gardener—I suppose there will have to be a gardener, we've got to drag that beastly cucumber in somehow or other—the gardener might be Scottish, and amusingly pessimistic about the early frosts."

This method sometimes worked, but it didn't seem to be going to this morning. Although Anthony could see Sonia and George and the comic gardener quite clearly, they didn't show any willingness to be active and do things.

"I could make it a banana, of course," thought Anthony desperately. "Or a lettuce, or a Brussels sprout—Brussels sprout, now, how about that? Really a cryptogram for *Brussels*—stolen bearer bonds—sinister Belgian Baron."

For a moment a gleam of light seemed to show, but it died down again. The Belgian Baron wouldn't materialize, and Anthony suddenly remembered that early frosts and cucumbers were incompatible, which seemed to put the lid on the amusing remarks of the Scottish gardener.

"Oh, damn!" said Mr. Eastwood.

He rose and seized the *Daily Mail*. It was just possible that someone or other had been done to death in such a way as to lend inspiration to a perspiring author. But the news this morning was mainly political and foreign. Mr. Eastwood cast down the paper in disgust.

Next, seizing a novel from the table, he closed his eyes and dabbed his finger down on one of the pages. The word thus indicated by fate was "sheep." Immediately, with startling brilliance, a whole story unrolled itself in Mr. Eastwood's brain. Lovely girl—lover killed in the war, her brain unhinged—tends sheep on the Scottish mountains—mystic meeting with dead lover, final effect of sheep and moonlight with girl lying dead in the snow, and *two trails of footsteps* . . .

It was a beautiful story. Anthony came out of its conception with a sigh and a sad shake of the head. He knew only too well that the editor in question did not want that kind of story, beauti-

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ful though it might be. The kind of story he wanted, and insisted on having (and incidentally paid handsomely for getting), was all about mysterious dark women stabbed to the heart, a young hero unjustly suspected, and the sudden unraveling of the mystery and fixing of the guilt on the least likely person, by means of wholly inadequate clues—in fact, "THE MYSTERY OF THE SECOND CUCUMBER."

"Although," reflected Anthony, "ten to one he'll alter the title and call it something like *'Murder Most Foul'* without so much as asking me! Oh, curse that telephone."

He strode angrily to it and took down the receiver. Twice already in the last hour he had been summoned to it, once for a wrong number, and once to be roped in for dinner by a skittish society dame whom he hated bitterly, but who had been too pertinacious to defeat.

"Hello!" he growled into the receiver.

A woman's voice answered him, a soft caressing voice with a trace of foreign accent.

"Is that you, beloved?" it said.

"Well—er—I don't know," said Mr. Eastwood cautiously. "Who's speaking?"

"It is I. Carmen. Listen, beloved. I am pursued—in danger—you must come at once. It is life or death now."

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Eastwood politely. "I'm afraid you've got the wrong—"

She broke in before he could complete the sentence.

"*Madre de Dios,* they are coming! If they find out what I am doing they will kill me. Do not fail me. Come at once. It is death for me if you don't come. You know, 320 Kirk Street. The password is cucumber. Hush . . ."

He heard the faint click as she hung up the receiver at the other end. "Well, I'm damned," said Mr. Eastwood, very much astonished. He crossed over to his tobacco jar, and filled his pipe carefully.

"I suppose," he mused, "that was some curious effect of my subconscious self. She can't have *said* cucumber. The whole thing is extraordinary. Did she say cucumber, or didn't she?"

He strolled up and down irresolutely.

"320 Kirk Street. I wonder what it's all about? She'll be expecting the other man to turn up. I wish I could have explained. 320 Kirk Street. The password is cucumber—oh, impossible,

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absurd—hallucination of a busy brain."

He glanced malevolently at the typewriter.

"What good are you, I should like to know? I've been looking at you all morning, and a lot of good it's done me. An author should get his plots from life—from life, do you hear? I'm going out to get one now."

He clapped a hat on his head, gazed affectionately at his priceless collection of old enamels, and left the flat.

Kirk Street, as most Londoners know, is a long straggling thoroughfare, chiefly devoted to antique shops, where all kinds of spurious goods are offered at fancy prices. There are also old brass shops, glass shops, decayed second-hand shops, and second-hand clothes dealers.

Number 320 was devoted to the sale of old glass. Glassware of all kinds filled it to overflowing. It was necessary for Anthony to move gingerly as he advanced up a center aisle flanked by wine glasses and with chandeliers swaying and twinkling over his head.

A very old lady was sitting at the back of the shop. She had a budding mustache that many an undergraduate might have envied, and a truculent manner.

She looked at Anthony and said, "Well?" in a forbidding voice.

Anthony was a young man somewhat easily discomposed. He immediately inquired the price of some hock glasses.

"Forty-five shillings for half a dozen."

"Oh, really," said Anthony. "Rather nice, aren't they? How much are these things?"

"Beautiful, they are, old Waterford. Let you have the pair for eighteen guineas."

Mr. Eastwood felt that he was laying up trouble for himself. In another minute he would be buying something, hypnotized by this fierce old woman's eye. And yet he could not bring himself to leave the shop.

"What about that?" he asked, and pointed to a chandelier.

"Thirty-five guineas."

"Ah!" said Mr. Eastwood regretfully. "That's rather more than I can afford."

"What do you want?" asked the old lady. "Something for a wedding present?"

"That's it," said Anthony, snatching at the explanation. "But the bride is very difficult to please."

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"Ah, well," said the lady, rising with an air of determination. "A nice piece of old glass comes amiss to nobody. I've got a couple of old decanters here—and there's a nice little liqueur set, just the thing for a bride—"

For the next ten minutes Anthony endured agonies. The lady had him firmly in hand. Every conceivable specimen of the glassmaker's art was paraded before his eyes. He became desperate.

"Beautiful, beautiful," he exclaimed in a perfunctory manner, as he put down a large goblet that was being forced on his attention. Then he blurted out, "I say, are you on the telephone here?"

"No, we're not. There's a call office at the post office just opposite. Now, what do you say, the goblet or these fine old runners?"

Not being a woman, Anthony was quite unversed in the gentle art of getting out of a shop without buying anything.

"I'd better have the liqueur set," he said gloomily.

It seemed the smallest thing. He was terrified of being landed with the chandelier.

With bitterness in his heart he paid for his purchase. And then, as the old lady was wrapping up the parcel, courage suddenly returned to him. After all, she would only think him eccentric, and, anyway, what the devil did it matter what she thought?

"Cucumber," he said, clearly and firmly.

The old crone paused abruptly in her wrapping operations.

"Eh? What did you say?"

"Nothing," lied Anthony hastily.

"Oh, I thought you said cucumber."

"So I did," said Anthony defiantly.

"Well," said the old lady. "Why ever didn't you say that before? Wasting my time. Through that door there and upstairs. She's waiting for you."

As though in a dream, Anthony passed through the door indicated, and climbed some extremely dirty stairs. At the top of them a door stood ajar displaying a tiny room.

Sitting on a chair, her eyes fixed on the door, and an expression of eager expectancy on her face, was a girl.

Such a girl! She really had the ivory pallor that Anthony had so often written about. And her eyes! Such eyes! She was not English, that could be seen at a glance. She had a foreign exotic quality which showed itself even in the costly simplicity of her dress.

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Anthony paused in the doorway, somewhat abashed. The moment of explanations seemed to have arrived. But with a cry of delight the girl rose and flew into his arms.

"You have come," she cried. "You have come. Oh, the saints and the Holy Madonna be praised."

Anthony, never one to miss opportunities, echoed her fervently. She drew away at last and looked up in his face with a charming shyness.

"I should never have known you," she declared. "Indeed I should not."

"Wouldn't you?" said Anthony feebly.

"No, even your eyes seem different—and you are ten times handsomer than I ever thought you would be."

"Am I?"

To himself Anthony was saying, "Keep calm, my boy, keep calm. The situation is developing very nicely, but don't lose your head."

"I may kiss you again, yes?"

"Of course," said Anthony heartily. "As often as you like."

There was a very pleasant interlude.

"I wonder who the devil I am?" thought Anthony. "I hope to goodness the real fellow won't turn up. What a perfect darling she is."

Suddenly the girl drew away from him, and terror showed in her face.

"You were not followed here?"

"Lord, no."

"Ah, but they are very cunning. You do not know them as well as I do. Boris, he is a fiend."

"I'll soon settle Boris for you."

"You are a lion—yes, but a lion. As for them, they are *canaille*—all of them. Listen, *I have it!* They would have killed me had they known. I was afraid—I did not know what to do, and then I thought of you . . . Hush, what was that?"

It was a sound in the shop below. Motioning to him to remain where he was, she tiptoed out to the stairs. She returned with a white face and staring eyes.

"*Madre de Dios!* It is the police. They are coming up here. You have a knife? A revolver? Which?"

"My dear girl, you don't seriously expect me to murder a policeman?"

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"Oh, but you are mad—mad! They will take you away and hang you by the neck until you're dead."

"They'll *what?*" said Mr. Eastwood, with a very unpleasant feeling going up and down his spine.

Steps sounded on the stair.

"Here they come," whispered the girl. "Deny everything. It is the only hope."

"That's easy enough," muttered Mr. Eastwood.

In another minute two men had entered the room. They were in plain clothes, but they had an official bearing that spoke of long training. The smaller of the two, a little dark man with quiet gray eyes, was the spokesman.

"I arrest you, Conrad Fleckman," he said, "for the murder of Anna Rauch. Anything you say will be used in evidence against you. Here is my warrant and you will do well to come quietly."

A half-strangled scream burst from the girl's lips. Anthony stepped forward with a composed smile.

"You are making a mistake, officer," he said pleasantly. "My name is Anthony Eastwood."

The two detectives seemed completely unimpressed by his statement.

"We'll see about that later," said the one who had not spoken before. "In the meantime you come along with us."

"Conrad," wailed the girl. "Conrad, do not let them take you."

Anthony looked at the detectives.

"You will permit me, I am sure, to say goodbye to this young lady?"

With more decency of feeling than he had expected, the two men moved toward the door. Anthony drew the girl into the corner by the window and spoke to her in a rapid undertone.

"Listen to me. What I said was true. I am not Conrad Fleckman. When you rang up this morning, they must have given you the wrong number. My name is Anthony Eastwood. I came in answer to your appeal because—well, I came."

She stared at him incredulously.

"You are not Conrad Fleckman?"

"No."

"Oh!" she cried, with a deep accent of distress. "And I kissed you!"

"That's all right," Mr. Eastwood assured her. "The early Christians made a practice of that sort of thing. Jolly sensible. Now look

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here, I'll tool off these people. I shall soon prove my identity. In the meantime, they won't worry you, and you can warn this precious Conrad of yours. Afterwards—"

"Yes?"

"Well, just this. My telephone number is Northwestern 1743—and mind they don't give you the wrong one."

She gave him an enchanting glance, half tears, half smile.

"I shall not forget—indeed, I shall not forget."

"That's all right then. Goodbye. I say—"

"Yes?"

"Talking of the early Christians, once more wouldn't matter, would it?"

She flung her arms round his neck. Her lips just touched his.

"I do like you—yes, I do like you. You will remember that, whatever happens, won't you?"

Anthony disengaged himself reluctantly and approached his captors.

"I am ready to come with you. You don't want to detain this young lady, I suppose?"

"No, sir, that will be quite all right," said the small man civilly.

"Decent fellows, these Scotland Yard men," thought Anthony to himself, as he followed them down the narrow stairway.

There was no sign of the old woman in the shop, but Anthony caught a heavy breathing from a door at the rear and guessed that she stood behind it, cautiously observing events.

Once out in the dinginess of Kirk Street, Anthony drew a long breath and addressed the smaller of the two men.

"Now then, Inspector—you are an Inspector, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir. Inspector Verrall. This is Sergeant Carter."

"Well, Inspector Verrall, the time has come to talk sense—and to listen to it too. I'm not Conrad What's-his-name. My name is Anthony Eastwood, as I told you, and I am a writer by profession. If you will accompany me to my flat, I think that I shall be able to satisfy you as to my identity."

Something in the matter-of-fact way Anthony spoke seemed to impress the detectives. For the first time an expression of doubt passed over Verrall's face. Carter, apparently, was harder to convince.

"I daresay," Carter sneered. "But you'll remember the young lady was calling you 'Conrad' all right."

"Ah, that's another matter. I don't mind admitting to you both

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that for—er—reasons of my own I was passing myself off on that lady as a person called Conrad. A private matter, you understand."

"Likely story, isn't it?" observed Carter. "No, sir, you come along with us. Hail that taxi, Joe."

A passing taxi was stopped and the three men got inside. Anthony made a last attempt, addressing himself to Verrall as the more easily convinced of the two.

"Look here, my dear Inspector, what harm is it going to do you to come along to my flat and see if I'm speaking the truth? It won't make five minutes' difference either way."

Verrall looked at him searchingly.

"I'll do it," he said suddenly. "Strange as it appears, I believe you're speaking the truth. We don't want to make fools of ourselves at the station by arresting the wrong man. What's the address?"

"Forty-eight Brandenburg Mansions."

Verrall leaned out and shouted the address to the taxi driver. All three sat in silence until they arrived at their destination, when Carter sprang out and Verrall motioned to Anthony to follow him.

"No need for any unpleasantness," Verrall explained, as he too descended. "We'll go in friendly like, as though Mr. Eastwood was bringing a couple of pals home."

Anthony felt extremely grateful for the suggestion and his opinion of the Criminal Investigation Department rose every minute.

In the hallway they were fortunate enough to meet Rogers, the porter. Anthony stopped.

"Ah, good evening, Rogers," he remarked.

"Good evening, Mr. Eastwood," replied the porter respectfully.

He was attached to Anthony, who set an example of liberality not always followed by his neighbors.

Anthony paused with his foot on the bottom step of the stairs.

"By the way, Rogers," he said casually. "How long have I been living here? I was just having a little discussion about it with these friends of mine."

"Let me see, sir, it must be getting on for close to four years now."

"Just what I thought."

Anthony flung a glance of triumph at the two detectives. Carter grunted, but Verrall was smiling broadly.

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"Good, but not good enough, sir," he remarked. "Shall we go up?"

Anthony opened the door of the flat with his latchkey. He was thankful to remember that Seamark, his man, was out. The fewer witnesses of this catastrophe the better.

The typewriter was as he had left it. Carter strode across to the table and read the headline on the paper.

"THE MYSTERY OF THE SECOND CUCUMBER," he announced in a gloomy voice.

"A story of mine," said Anthony nonchalantly.

"That's another good point, sir," said Verrall nodding his head, his eyes twinkling. "By the way, sir, what was it about? What *was* the mystery of the second cucumber?"

"Ah, there you have me," said Anthony. "It's that second cucumber that's at the bottom of all this trouble."

Carter was looking at him intently. Suddenly he shook his head and tapped his forehead significantly.

"Balmy, poor young fellow," he murmured in an audible aside.

"Now, gentlemen," said Mr. Eastwood briskly. "To business. Here are letters addressed to me, my bank book, communications from editors. What more do you want?"

Verrall examined the papers that Anthony thrust on him.

"Speaking for myself, sir," he said respectfully, "I want nothing more. I'm quite convinced. But I can't take the responsibility of releasing you. You see, although it seems positive that you have been residing here as Mr. Eastwood for some years, yet it is possible that Conrad Fleckman and Anthony Eastwood are one and the same person. I must make a thorough search of the flat, take your fingerprints, and telephone headquarters."

"That seems a comprehensive program," remarked Anthony. "I can assure you that you're welcome to any guilty secrets of mine you may lay your hands on."

The Inspector grinned. For a detective he was a singularly human person. "Will you go into the little end room, sir, with Carter, while I'm getting busy?"

"All right," said Anthony unwillingly. "I suppose it couldn't be the other way about, could it?"

"Meaning?"

"That you and I and a couple of whiskies and sodas should occupy the end room while our friend, the Sergeant, does the heavy searching."

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"If you prefer it, sir."

"I do prefer it."

They left Carter investigating the contents of the desk with businesslike dexterity. As they passed out of the room, they heard him take down the telephone and call Scotland Yard.

"This isn't so bad," said Anthony, settling himself with a whiskey and soda by his side, having hospitably attended to the wants of Inspector Verrall. "Shall I drink first, just to show you that the whiskey isn't poisoned?"

The Inspector smiled.

"Very irregular, all this," he remarked. "But we know a thing or two in our profession. I realized right from the start that we'd made a mistake. But of course one had to observe all the usual forms. You can't get away from red tape, can you, sir?"

"I suppose not," said Anthony regretfully. "The Sergeant doesn't seem very matey, though, does he?"

"Ah, he's a fine man, Sergeant Carter. You wouldn't find it easy to put anything over on him."

"I've noticed that," said Anthony. "By the way, Inspector," he added, "is there any objection to my hearing something about myself?"

"In what way, sir?"

"Come now, don't you realize that I'm devoured by curiosity? Who was Anna Rauch, and why did I murder her?"

"You'll read all about it in the newspapers tomorrow, sir."

"Tomorrow I may be Myself with Yesterday's ten thousand years," quoted Anthony. "I really think you might satisfy my perfectly legitimate curiosity, Inspector. Cast aside your official reticence and tell me all."

"It's quite irregular, sir."

"My dear Inspector, when we are becoming such fast friends?"

"Well, sir, Anna Rauch was a German who lived at Hampstead. With no visible means of livelihood, she grew yearly richer and richer."

"I'm just the opposite," commented Anthony. "I have a visible means of livelihood and I get yearly poorer and poorer. Perhaps I should do better if I lived in Hampstead. I've always heard Hampstead is very bracing."

"At one time," continued Verrall, "she was a second-hand clothes dealer—"

"That explains it," interrupted Anthony. "I remember selling

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my uniform after the war—not khaki, the other stuff. The whole flat was full of red trousers and gold lace, spread out to best advantage. A fat man in a check suit arrived in a Rolls Royce with a factotum complete with bag. He bid one pound ten for the lot. In the end I threw in a hunting coat and some Zeiss glasses and at a given signal the factotum opened the bag and shoveled the goods inside, and the fat man tendered me a ten-pound note and asked me for change."

"About ten years ago," continued the Inspector, "there were several Spanish political refugees in London—among them a certain Don Fernando Ferrarez with his young wife and child. They were very poor, and the wife was ill. Anna Rauch visited the place where they were lodging and asked if they had anything to sell.

"Don Fernando was out, and his wife decided to part with a very wonderful Spanish shawl, embroidered in a marvelous manner, which had been one of her husband's last presents to her before flying from Spain. When Don Fernando returned, he flew into a terrible rage on hearing the shawl had been sold, and tried vainly to recover it. When he at last succeeded in finding the second-hand clothes woman in question, she declared that she had resold the shawl to a woman whose name she did not know.

"Don Fernando was in despair. Two months later he was stabbed in the street and died as a result of his wounds. From that time onward, Anna Rauch seemed suspiciously flush of money. In the ten years that followed, her house at Hampstead was burgled no less than eight times. Four of the attempts were frustrated and nothing was taken; on the other four occasions an embroidered shawl of some kind was part of the booty."

The Inspector paused, then went on in obedience to an urgent gesture from Anthony.

"A week ago Carmen Ferrarez, the young daughter of Don Fernando, arrived in this country from a convent in France. Her first action was to seek out Anna Rauch at Hampstead. There she is reported to have had a violent scene with the old woman, and her words at leaving were overheard by one of the servants.

" 'You have it still,' she cried. 'All these years you have grown rich on it, but I say to you solemnly that in the end it will bring you bad luck. You have no moral right to it, and the day will come when you will wish you had never seen the Shawl of the Thousand Flowers.'

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"Three days after that, Carmen Ferrarez disappeared mysteriously from the hotel where she was staying. In her room was found a name and address—the name of Conrad Fleckman, and also a note from a man purporting to be an antique dealer asking if she were disposed to part with a certain embroidered shawl which he believed she had in her possession. The address given on the note was a false one.

"It is clear that the shawl is the center of the whole mystery. Yesterday morning Conrad Fleckman called on Anna Rauch. She was shut up with him for an hour or more, and when he left she was obliged to go to bed, so white and shaken was she by the interview. But she gave orders that if he came to see her again he was always to be admitted.

"Last night she got up and went out about nine o'clock, and did not return. She was found this morning in the house occupied by Conrad Fleckman, stabbed through the heart. On the floor beside her was—what do you think?"

"The shawl?" breathed Anthony. "The Shawl of the Thousand Flowers."

"Something far more gruesome than that. Something which explained the whole mysterious business of the shawl and made its hidden value clear . . . Excuse me, I fancy that's the chief—"

There had indeed been a ring at the bell. Anthony contained his impatience as best he could, and waited for the Inspector to return. He was well at ease now about his own position. As soon as they took his fingerprints they would realize their mistake.

And then, perhaps, Carmen would ring up . . .

The Shawl of the Thousand Flowers! What a strange story—just the kind of story to make an appropriate setting for the girl's exquisite dark beauty.

Carmen Ferrarez . . .

He jerked himself back from daydreaming. What a time that Inspector fellow was. Anthony rose and pulled the door open. The flat was strangely silent. Could they have gone? Surely not without a word to him. He strode out into the next room. It was empty—so was the sitting room. Strangely empty! It had a bare disheveled appearance. Good heavens! His enamels—the silver!

He rushed wildly through the flat. It was the same tale everywhere. The place had been denuded. Every single thing of value—and Anthony had a collector's taste in small things—had been taken.

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With a groan Anthony staggered to a chair, his head in his hands. He was aroused by the ringing of the front doorbell. He opened it to confront Rogers.

"You'll excuse me, sir," said Rogers. "But the gentlemen fancied you might be wanting something."

"The gentlemen?"

"Those two friends of yours, sir. I helped them with the packing as best I could. Very fortunately I happened to have two large cases in the basement." His eyes dropped to the floor. "I've swept up the straw as best I could, sir."

"You packed the things in here?" groaned Anthony.

"Yes, sir. Was that not your wish, sir? It was the tall gentleman told me to do so, sir, and seeing as you were busy talking to the other gentleman in the little end room I didn't like to disturb you."

"I wasn't talking to him," said Anthony. "He was talking to me—curse him."

Rogers coughed. "I'm sure I'm very sorry for the necessity, sir," he murmured.

"Necessity?"

"Of parting with your little treasures, sir."

"Eh? Oh, yes. Ha, ha!" Anthony gave a mirthless laugh. "They've driven off by now, I suppose. Those—those friends of mine, I mean?"

"Oh, yes, sir, some time ago. I put the cases on the taxi and the tall gentleman went upstairs again, and then they both came down and drove off at once . . . Excuse me, sir, but is anything wrong?"

Rogers might well ask. The hollow groan which Anthony emitted would have aroused surmise anywhere.

"Everything is wrong, thank you, Rogers. But I see clearly that you were not to blame. Leave me, I would commune a while with my telephone."

Fifteen minutes later saw Anthony pouring his tale into the ears of Inspector Driver, who sat opposite to him, notebook in hand. An unsympathetic man, Inspector Driver, and not (Anthony reflected) nearly so like a real Inspector! Distinctly stagey, in fact. Another striking example of the superiority of Art over Nature.

Anthony reached the end of his tale. The Inspector shut up his notebook.

"Well?" said Anthony anxiously.

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"Clear as paint," said the Inspector. "It's the Patterson gang. They've done a lot of smart work lately. Big fair man, small dark man, and the girl."

"The girl?"

"Yes, dark and mighty good-looking. Acts as decoy usually."

"A—a Spanish girl?"

"She might call herself that. She was born in Hampstead."

"I *said* it was a bracing place," murmured Anthony.

"Yes, it's clear enough," said the Inspector, rising to depart. "She got you on the phone and pitched you a tale—she guessed you'd come along all right. Then she goes to old Mother Gibson's who isn't above accepting a tip for the use of her room for them as finds it awkward to meet in public—lovers, you understand, nothing criminal. You fall for it all right, they get you back here, and while one of them pitches you a tale the other gets away with the swag.

"It's the Pattersons all right—just their touch."

"And my things?" said Anthony anxiously.

"We'll do what we can, sir. But the Pattersons are uncommon sharp."

"They seem to be," said Anthony bitterly.

The Inspector departed and scarcely had he gone before there was a ring at the door. Anthony opened it. A small boy stood there, holding a package.

"Parcel for you, sir."

Anthony took it with some surprise. He was not expecting a parcel of any kind. Returning to the sitting room with it, he cut the string.

It was a liqueur set!

"Damn!" said Anthony.

Then he noticed that at the bottom of one of the glasses there was a tiny artificial rose. His mind flew back to the upper room in Kirk Street.

"I do like you—yes, I do like you. You will remember that whatever happens, won't you?"

That was what she had said. *Whatever happens* . . . Did she mean—?

Anthony took hold of himself sternly.

"This won't do," he admonished himself.

His eye fell on the typewriter, and he sat down with a resolute face.

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THE MYSTERY OF THE
SECOND CUCUMBER

His face grew dreamy again. The Shawl of the Thousand Flowers. What was it that was found on the floor beside the dead body? The gruesome thing that explained the whole mystery?

Nothing, of course, since it was only a trumped-up tale to hold his attention, and the teller had used the old Arabian Nights' trick of breaking off at the most interesting point. But couldn't there be a gruesome thing that explained the whole mystery? Couldn't there? If one put one's mind to it?

Anthony tore the sheet of paper from his typewriter and substituted another. He typed a headline:

THE MYSTERY OF THE
SPANISH SHAWL

He surveyed it for a moment or two in silence.
Then he began to type rapidly.

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

IN MEMORIAM

by C. McINERNEY

May his little gray cells rest at last
As he joins famous sleuths of the past.
Dear Dame Agatha, thanks
For Hercule's mental pranks—
But, alas, is Jane's die also cast?

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DEPARTMENT OF SECOND STORIES

Kelly H. Blau's first story—"What Have You Been Doing All Day?"—appeared in our October 1973 issue. Her new story took a longer time than usual for a second story to reach our desk, but you may remember that Mrs. Blau is a busy housewife, with a husband and three children to care for. We described her first story as "a searing comment on a vital aspect of our times." Her second story has a much lighter touch, but it too has something to say about our times—something important . . .

THE SCAVENGERS

by KELLY H. BLAU

"But it wouldn't be stealing, Ma," John Gregory said, squinting his eyes the way Donald always used to when he was making a serious argument. "It would be more like an appropriation. Yeah. In this case"—and there was Donald's ragged grin on his face—"you might even call it an *appropriate* appropriation."

"Call it what you like, John Gregory. It's still dangerous. And it's against the law," I said, punctuating with telling jabs at the bread dough I was molding for Christmas breakfast. "Besides, what do you think your father would say?"

"I *know* what he'd say, Ma. Do it." John Gregory slid his slim rump up onto the counter and reached out to hold my hands in the gluey mass of dough, forcing me to look at him. "For cryin' out loud, Ma! You know as well as I do that Dad was singing about doing it his way long before Frank Sinatra made it famous. Thou shall not steal, *sure*—but the Lord helps those who—you know. Listen, will you?" he said, sliding off the counter and waving his skinny arm at the noisy living room.

"Those kids haven't been so excited and alive since Dad died. For a long time it was like we died with him and"—he swung around to face me again—"we both know Dad wouldn't have

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wanted that. He liked laughing and planning and having fun and that's what we're all finally doing again. And we're doing it because of a tag sale that's going to make enough money to take us to Disneyworld. Palm trees, Ma," he said, coming to squeeze my shoulders in his bony hands. "Mickey Mouse and Let's Pretend. It sounds like heaven!"

"I know, John Gregory. I know what it means to them—to all of us, but—"

"But nothing, Ma," he cut in. "Those kids have been working their tails off since Thanksgiving—scrounging everywhere they could think of to get stuff to sell, fixing up everything around here that isn't nailed down if they think somebody else might possibly pay a nickel for it. But it isn't enough. At the rate we're going *all* of us will be in college instead of just me before we get *near* Florida. How do you think they're all going to feel after the sale comes off and there isn't anywhere near enough? How do you think *I'm* going to feel?" His voice cracked slightly and his eyes were tear-shiny with frustration. "The whole mess was my idea."

"John Gregory," I said as gently as I could, "there won't be any anything if we're all in jail."

"We *won't* be! I'm not talking about steal—I mean, appropriating—anything too important. Well, maybe one or two things like an old TV from one of the summer houses over by the lake. Most of it would be things people wouldn't ever miss—you know, the kind of stuff people go to tag sales for anyhow, like odd glasses and banged-up pots and pans. That kind of thing. Maybe a lawmower or two thrown in. Nothing that wouldn't look like something we ourselves might have to sell. We'd be careful. Probably nobody would even miss the stuff. Quantity not quality, you know, Ma? I could make out a list for the kids to follow—things to steer clear of and all. We'd be careful, Ma, I promise."

And there was Donald looking at me again out of John Gregory's face. My Donald, young and determined as he was when he talked me into buying a farmhouse in the Berkshire hills, with eleven kids to fill it. Practical Donald—"We'll name all the boys John and all the girls Mary to make calling them for supper easier!" Self-sufficient, confident Donald—"Don't call the plumber—electrician—painter. What I don't know I can learn to do myself." Dead Donald.

"Well, Ma?"

"I'll think about it, John Gregory," I said, turning back to the

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dough that had already begun to rise over the side of the bowl. "Brush off your jeans, you're covered with flour."

I did think about it a great deal, but John Gregory and I never really discussed his idea again. The holidays seemed to get in the way. Days were full of cornpopping and carols, roaring fires in the fireplace, skating parties and hot chocolate. Looking back, I'm sure we were trying *too* hard. To forget Donald.

If there were more secret meetings between the children or more hushed giggling whispers than usual at that time of year, I guess I didn't notice. Christmas had always been a time of secrets and excitement, and when we woke to find fresh snow on Christmas morning, everything seemed perfect again.

Disneyworld was still the hub of all the excitement, aided and abetted by John Gregory's Christmas gift to the family—a detailed picture map he'd got from a travel agent and had framed to hang in the kitchen. Bright cartoon figures skipped and swam or peeped out from behind palm trees in vari-colored areas with such dream-inspiring names as Fantasyland, Adventureland, Tomorrowland. Dessert for every meal was a lively discussion about who would do what first with whom—suntans, monorails, orange groves, twirling teacups, and enchanted castles. And our store of accumulated merchandise for the tag sale grew daily.

When John Gregory went back to the University for the winter term, the fever pitch slowed to a quiet businesslike pace. Hardly a day passed that one of the children didn't add to the growing piles of goods. John Peter took the car out once or twice a week in late afternoon or early evening to return with the back seat laden with treasures; Mary Susan and Mary Katherine added their donations garnered from baby-sitting jobs. Even the younger kids contributed, and we spent our evenings brightening and repairing used or broken toys.

"Around" or "a nice old lady over on Waverly Street" were the answers I got when I asked where all the things came from. So I stopped asking. Once in a while I would find myself cringing when an unknown car pulled into the driveway or when I pored over the police news in the daily paper. But the Berkshires seemed to be as winter-quiet as ever. The strange cars never held more than the regular herd of visitors that ten children at home seem to generate and the police seemed more annoyed than concerned with the rash of prankish breakings and enterings perpe-

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trated, they said, by high-spirited juveniles who never took anything valuable. I put John Gregory's plan and my own fears out of mind. There were too many others things to do.

The girls and I cooked and sewed until our hands were cramped—hand puppets made out of single mittens salvaged from the school's lost-and-found department, patchwork aprons from worn, outgrown dresses, the freezer full of banana bread from bunches of cheap over-ripe fruit. The dining-room floor seemed constantly confettied with small squares of white paper with neatly penned prices.

John Peter's *pièce de résistance* was a perfectly serviceable aluminum canoe found, he said, in the melting ice of the lake and painted bright salmon-pink by his brothers to make it more saleable. (And less recognizable? I didn't think about it. Then.)

But to John Gregory, the victor, fell the most spoils. He arrived home for the spring vacation with his old van chock-full of donations for the cause—odds and ends of winter clothing, two pairs of skis, several alarm clocks, tape recorders, and transistor radios. It was a windfall. We would put only one of each item out for sale at a time. John Gregory felt that would cause fewer questions.

Finally we put a two-line Tag Sale notice in the local newspaper and it seemed that every tree for two blocks boasted a hand-lettered announcement. All of us were up before dawn on the day of the sale, afraid nobody would come I guess, but by ten o'clock the yard was jammed with people and the edges of the street were filling with more cars.

It was a glorious day, spring-chilly with bright sunshine promising summer. Many of the daffodils I had planted at the side of the house were in bloom, adding extra warmth to the yard until John Peter sold them at fifty cents a bunch. People were everywhere, poking, pawing, carting off their bargain treasures.

"No more wet blankets, Ma?" John Gregory whispered as he helped me carry another urn of coffee out onto the porch.

"I'll have the camper packed for Florida right after supper, John Gregory," I smiled.

The people kept coming, often in droves, at other times in a mere trickle. Some were just out for a pleasant Saturday drive, others proudly announced themselves to be Tag Sale aficionados who trooped from sale to sale as a weekend hobby. The majority were strangers, of course, but there were familiar faces, too. Which was why I was startled, but not too surprised, to find

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Dorrie Crain lounging in the kitchen during one of my endless forays to refill the coffee pot.

"Hello, Marion," she said, wiggling the fingers she had been idly drumming on the table. "I got tired of waiting for a chance to talk to you outside, so I thought I'd rest my weary soul here in the kitchen. Much better to have our little chat away from the madding crowd anyhow, don't you think?"

"I'm really rather busy right now, Dorrie. Could we visit later?" I said, clanking the empty coffee pot's innards as proof. Normally I don't think I would have been quite so abrupt, especially to a neighbor. But Dorrie Crain had never been one of my favorite people.

"Oh, I know you're busy, sweetie. You've *all* been so *very* busy for quite a while, haven't you? Such an *industrious* little family! The wonderful upright-uptight Hurleys! Crooked little people in this crooked little house."

Dorrie Crain threw her head back and laughed, sliding down to slouch in the chair. "What's that old saying? Something about good fences making good neighbors? In your case, good neighbors make good fences!"

She kept laughing at me in her fake, movie-star way. At least I think she was. Her mouth stayed open but I didn't hear the sounds. I didn't hear anything except a pounding in my ears. I could feel my hands clenching in my apron pockets and my face was on fire.

"Oh, now, Marion, sweetie, don't go getting that sanctimonious mother-lion look with me. You and your brood are crooks—it's as simple as that. I know it and you know it. But don't worry, I don't think anybody else knows it. I probably wouldn't have caught on either if I hadn't happened to get here early."

Dorrie leaned across the kitchen table toward me, her face and wide, innocently harmless eyes looming larger and larger, like something under a microscope.

"Don't fret, sweetie, really. I just happened to buy a little German ceramic out there this morning. I thought it was an exact duplicate of one Harry and I picked up on our honeymoon and would make a nice pair. Funny, though. It even had the same little chip on the side that my old one got in the suitcase coming home. Only trouble was, when I got home the old one wasn't there. It didn't take a Sherlock to figure it out—especially with your dear little Mary Katherine in and out of my house babysit-

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ting all the time. Add that to the acres of junk you're displaying in the garage and I've got to figure Mary Katherine isn't the only light-fingered one in the bunch."

"What are you going to do?" It came out in a strangled whisper and I hated myself for it, but my mind and mouth didn't seem to want to work together. I was sputtering like a stupid teakettle while she sat there grinning at me. I wanted to slap her face and my knees were shaking. Strange, feeling your bones turn rubbery. The kitchen counter was cutting into my back where I leaned against it, but I hardly noticed.

"Oh, good, you're not going to act the injured innocent. That's sensible. Now," Dorrie said, "let's get down to business. I want in and I want half."

"What?" Was that croaking voice mine?

"In. Half." She enunciated patiently as if I were a kindergarten child, leaning toward me, propping her elbows on the table to rest her face in manicured fingers. "It would be much more profitable for us both if we became partners."

"Partners?" Was I a parrot? I was still having trouble getting her in focus.

"Oh, come off it! Here, sit down and listen!" she snapped, pushing a chair toward me with her foot. I must have fallen into it because I found myself looking into her eyes, noticing incongruously that her blue eye shadow had smudged onto her nose.

"There. That's much better, sweetie," she said, patting my hand. "Now, I know your tastes aren't quite as sophisticated as mine. A camping trip to Disneyworld sure isn't my idea of high living. But jewelry and nice clothes are. Unfortunately, Harry's pay doesn't exactly rise to meet every occasion. Yes, I could sure use some extra cash that little Harry doesn't know about. He gets nasty when I go over my allowance, you know.

"I've thought it all out, sweetie. I figure I can pick up a few items here and there. Shoplifting isn't all that hard, you know. Not if you're careful. But then"—she giggled—"I guess you know that. And you're not getting a pig in a poke. I've done some in my time—pennyante stuff, I'll admit. Bubble gum, lipsticks when I was a kid, but I'll aim higher now. Costume jewelry—things like that maybe. Never fear, I'll pull my oar." She leaned back again in the chair, stretching comfortably. We might have been discussing a new recipe.

"Now, personally, I think a fifty-fifty split is fair. And of course

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the split will have to start right away. On account, you might say—on account of I need some new clothes and on account of I wouldn't want to have to report you to the police and ruin a good thing."

She stared at me levelly. "You do know I could have my own sale without you, don't you? It's just those kids of yours and this setup are too perfect to waste. Who's going to think twice about how a widow and eleven *poor* fatherless children make some extra bread? Right? Yeah. Fifty-fifty right down the line, Marion my love. What do you say?"

What do you say? What *do* you say? Blackmail. Thieving. Not only now, but maybe forever with Dorrie Crain pushing you along. Walking in fear of this woman, selling your soul for a few days in a make-believe world in Florida. But the alternatives—jail, publicity, legal fees.

Could I turn all of us in? Would that help? Give up the plans we worked so hard for, that had brought my children back to life? Pay back what we couldn't give back, maybe? Rewind everything like a home movie so that things would be the way they were. Back to before the sale. Back to not smiling, to eking out a living.

What do you say, Marion? What would Donald have said? Roll with the punches? Cut your losses, Marion—make the best of a bad situation? What do you say, Marion? What could I say?

"No."

Dorrie Crain's eyes narrowed at me. I knew she was going to threaten me again. But you can't argue with people like Dorrie Crain. You have to be firm, and after dealing with eleven children all these years, I could be firm when I had to be.

"No, Dorrie. It'll be seventy-five twenty-five or nothing."

"Q"

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME DOSSIER

by OTTO PENZLER

MYTH TAKE: One of the great bromides of the publishing industry is "Short-story books don't sell." No one knows exactly where the myth originated, but it would be foolishness itself to take it too seriously. Looking at the long list of mystery, crime, and suspense story collections published in recent months, one would have to conclude that (a) collections *don't* sell, but publishers are so philanthropic they are issuing these volumes anyway; or (b) they *do* sell. Well, even if they don't hit the best-seller lists, let's rejoice in them because some of the most stunning, mind-bending, terrifying, clever, compelling, intelligent, and satisfying fiction ever created (particularly in the world of the mystery) has been in the short form.

Among the collections that deserve special attention this fall is Isaac Asimov's *More Tales of the Black Widowers* (Doubleday, $5.95), a continuation of the series about the club (based loosely on real-life people) which meets to solve problems, generally of a criminal nature. They were initially published in *EQMM,* as were the stories in the first collection, *Tales of the Black Widowers,* recently reprinted in paperback (Fawcett, $1.50).

A debt of gratitude is owed to E. P. Dutton for its ongoing series of *Best Detective Stories of the Year* ($8.95), very capably edited this year by Edward D. Hoch. The 30th annual collection includes, in addition to 17 fine tales, bibliographies of 1975's collections, anthologies and non-fiction, a list of award-winners, an honor role of outstanding stories, and a necrology. Another series offers one of the best volumes in its long-lived existence: *Tricks and Treats* (Doubleday, $5.95), an anthology of mystery stories by the Mystery Writers of America, edited by Joe Gores and Bill Pronzini. Ellery Queen has put together another volume as the most prolific anthologist of all time. *Ellery Queen's Crime Wave* (Putnam, $8.95) is the 30th annual collection, this one featuring

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the best stories published in *EQMM* during 1974.

Also due is *Magicians of Mystery* (Dial, $8.95), which features some of the outstanding fiction published in the 35-year history of *EQMM*. Another prolific anthologist, Alfred Hitchcock, lends his name to *Tales To Keep You Spellbound* (Dial, $8.95), which includes stories published in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine.*

One of the most significant anthologies of the year has been compiled by Herbert Ruhm. *The Hard-Boiled Detectives: Stories from* Black Mask *Magazine* (Vintage, $2.45) contains 14 stories, 11 of which have never been reprinted, including a "discovery" —a Dashiell Hammett tale originally published under the pseudonym, Peter Collinson.

With publishers also offering new collections by Robert Bloch, Anthony Boucher, Robert L. Fish, Michael Gilbert, Maxwell Grant, Edward D. Hoch, Barry Perowne, and Clayton Rawson, among others, the short story of crime and death is—yes—alive and well.

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BLOODY VISIONS

by CHRIS STEINBRUNNER

In an extraordinary experiment recently, London's Thames Television imported a week of varied British programming to America (seen on WOR-TV in New York) and, as both mystery telefeatures and series were included in the lineup of shows, we were able to appraise how the British handle their crime dramas—or imitate ours.

Our *Kojak* is wildly popular in England, so it's not surprising local cops-and-robbers programs flourish. *The Sweeney,* one of the rare weekly series to run three seasons, tells of the Metropolitan Police Flying Squad, and derives its title from its Cockney rhyming-slang nickname, "Sweeney Todd" (you surely remember the old Demon Barber murderer). Leading this elite mobile unit is Detective Inspector Jack Regan, a "total professional" whose 24-hour-a-day commitment to fighting crime has already ended his marriage. There are some familiar-looking car crashes and borrowed violence—done with slightly more enthusiasm than is seen today on cautious American TV—but the show has an engaging raw power, especially as it is filmed entirely on location in London's streets. *Special Branch* (two seasons) roams with the shadowy heroes of Scotland Yard's security arm, a police division originally formed to defuse

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anarchist bombs in the 1880's—and is today battling terrorists with grit and modern weaponry. This series too is realistically shot in pubs, clubs, and back alleys.

The extremely popular *Callan* is an espionage show whose introspective ex-convict hero is secretly a counter-agent who often becomes too dangerously involved with his enemy targets. Complex and fallible, Callan's protective concern for a grubby informant called "Lonely" —the nickname suits both men— is a running relationship.

There are anthology series too. *Shades of Greene*—prestige dramatizations of Graham Greene stories—includes several well-done mysteries. The 90-minute *Mystery and Imagination* mounts such familiar classics as *Dracula, Frankenstein* (in which both Victor and his creation are played by the same actor with interesting intimations of paranoia), and an especially handsome version of Stevenson's *The Suicide Club.*

Telefeatures included *Suspect,* about a child-murderer in a quiet English village, and *Rumour,* in which a Fleet Street journalist thinks he has uncovered a sex scandal involving a murdered call girl and a government official. Despite the inflammatory subjects, the dramas (both authored by talented writer-director Mike Hodges) were extremely probing and restrained. All in all, the rich variety of suspense shows demonstrated that, despite some transatlantic similarities, the British television mystery is individually crafted with affection and respect.

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INTERVIEW: P. D. JAMES

P. D. James, the creator of the popular Adam Dalgliesh, has the pleasant and rare distinction of receiving universally good reviews for every one of her novels. There have been only seven so far, and her growing fandom anxiously anticipates the next.

EQMM: Would you say you have been consciously influenced by any mystery or crime writer?

JAMES: No, I don't think so. I think I have been influenced only by writers one never thinks of in connection with mystery writing—particularly Jane Austen, my literary idol. It would be curious to imagine being influenced stylistically by her, but I suppose I have, a bit, by Dorothy Sayers. I admire many women writers tremendously, especially Margery Allingham and the way in which she can create atmosphere. But I don't think I have ever felt I would model myself on either of them.

EQMM: You didn't write your first mystery until 1962. Why — and how did it finally happen?

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JAMES: Well, I always wanted to write. Every writer says that, I'm sure. From childhood I saw myself as a writer. Then the war came, I married young, had children, and there seemed little point in writing during wartime. For one thing, I was very unsure of survival, and then there was no paper. But I was also very busy, and then my husband came back from army service very ill, so I had to start supporting the family. Years went by and I suddenly realized that if I didn't begin I was going to be, one day, an old lady who thought she was going to be a writer and who had written nothing. This wasn't any good at all; one can always make excuses. The time for excuses had stopped. If I was going to write, I must write *now*. So I sat down in a very determined way and stuck at it. My children were much intrigued. I began tap-tapping away at the end of a day's work, and they probably thought, The poor old lady is going to be a big disappointment here. But in fact the book was accepted by the first publisher it was offered to, with very little alteration or editing.

EQMM: You've never had a book rejected, never had a bad review, never had a failure. Does this make you nervous? Or arrogant?

JAMES: It doesn't make me in the least way arrogant. I think the reverse is true. One fears the day will come when someone says: "It can't compare with previous books." I'm sure every writer who has had good reviews feels this. Also I've never had overwhelming financial success. I've never produced a runaway best-seller. Really, all in all, I feel quite humble. After all, if one has a talent it is simply a gift, something one is born with and can take no real credit for.

REVIEWS OF NEW BOOKS

CATCH A FALLING SPY, by Len Deighton. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, $7.95.

From the heat-oppressed wastelands of the Sahara to the streets of Manhattan, Paris and Dublin, Len Deighton, author of the best-selling *The Ipcress File* and *Yesterday's Spy*, weaves a tale of spy networks, power politics, technology and counter intelligence all in the game of espionage. You "will be kept busy sorting out KGB from CIA heavies right up to the final page... The action is riveting, the dialogue crackles with sardonic wit, and there's a touching romantic interest."—*Publishers Weekly*

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S TALES TO KEEP YOU SPELLBOUND, The Dial Press, $8.95.

This is the first of a new series of anthologies consisting of stories that first saw the light of day in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*. And a bonanza collection it is, with 30 stories by some of AHMM's most competent and illustrious tale-spinners.

Included are 7 stories that won awards in the magazine's story contest in the '60s—Jack Ritchie's "The Third Call," Robert Bloch's "A Home Away from Home," Henry Slesar's "You Can't Blame Me," Donald Honig's "The Man We Found," Lawrence Page's "Final Arrangements," Clark Howard's "Spook House," and Gilbert Ralston's "A Very Cautious Boy."

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REVIEWS OF NEW BOOKS

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In her newest novel of romantic suspense, Barbara Michaels combines the excitement of the American Revolution as it really was with the thrilling story of a girl gripped by emotions too turbulent for control—or explanation—when she realises she is falling in love with a man who lived 200 years before.

"This very popular mystery writer has never been in better form than in this romantic novel of suspense set alternately in today's restored Colonial Williamsburg and in the 18th century town as it was during the Revolution... a very different and distinctly moving view of what life in Revolutionary Virginia was really like for white and black."—*Publishers Weekly*

COME KILL WITH ME, A Novel of Suspense, by Fred Kassak. Translated by Martin Sokolinsky. Bobbs-Merrill, $8.95.

Pierre is a 25-year-old lingerie salesman, in love with Marie-José, who is in love with Gérard, who is unhappily married to the Gorgon. Altruistic Pierre "arranges" for the Gorgon's demise, and almost kills Gérard. Finally, Marie-José and Gérard are happily united, only to have Gérard turn into a Svengali. Altruistic Pierre "arranges" for the couple's permanent separation, only to have Marie-José accused of her husband's death. In the meantime, Pierre has fallen in love with Jinx, who is in love with Lobar. Freed from prison and finally in love with Pierre herself, altruistic Marie-José begins making inquiries about Lobar. *Come Kill With Me* is a comedy of murderous errors and accidental triumphs that could only happen in France.

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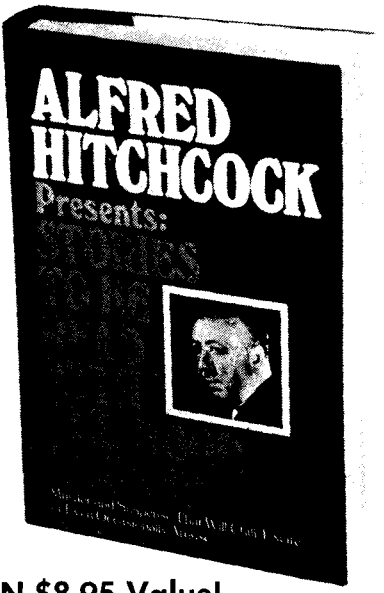

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THE CHRISTMAS MASQUE

by S. S. RAFFERTY

(continued from page 36)

The great clock in the center hall had just tolled three when Cork finished talking with the other five young men who had carried the murdered girl in the sedan chair. They all corroborated Brock's version. All were ignorant of any expression of love between Brock and Lydia, and they were unanimous in their relief that Brock, and not one of them, had been Gretchen's intended. As one young man named Langley put it, "At least Brock has an inheritance of his own, and would not have been dependent on his wife and mother-in-law."

"Dependent?" Cork queried. "Would he not assume her estate under law?"

"No, sir, not in this house," Langley explained. "I am told it's a kind of morganatic arrangement and a tradition with the old van der Malin line. I have little income, so Gretchen would have been no bargain for me. Not that I am up to the Dame's standards."

When Langley had left, Trask the footman entered to tell us that rooms had been prepared for us at the Major's request. Cork thanked him and said, "I know the hour is late, but is your mistress available?"

He told us he would see, and showed us to a small sitting-room off the main upstairs hall. It was a tight and cozy chamber with a newly-stirred hearth and the accoutrements of womankind—a small velvet couch with tiny pillows, a secretaire in the corner, buckbaskets of knitting and mending.

Unusual, however, was the portrait of the Dame herself that hung on a wall over the secretaire. It was certainly not the work of a local limner, for the controlled hand of a master painter showed through. Each line was carefully laid down, each colour blended one with the other, to produce a perfect likeness of the Dame. She was dressed in a gown almost as beautiful as the one she had worn this evening. At her throat was a remarkable diamond necklace which, despite the two dimensions of the portrait, was lifelike in its cool, blue-white lustre.

Cork was drawn to the portrait and even lifted a candle to

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study it more closely. I joined him and was about to tell him to be careful of the flame when a voice from behind startled me.

"There are additional candles if you need more light."

We both turned to find Wilda van Schooner standing in the doorway. She looked twice her 17 years with the obvious woe she carried inside her. Her puffed eyes betrayed the tears of grief that had recently welled there.

"Forgive my curiosity, Miss van Schooner," Cork said, turning back to the portrait. "Inquisitiveness and a passion for details are my afflictions. This work was done in Europe, of course?"

"No, sir, here in New York, although Jan der Trogue is from the continent. He is—was—to have painted all of us eventually." She broke off into thought and then rejoined us. "My mother is with my sister, gentlemen, and is not available. She insists on seeing to Gretchen herself."

"That is most admirable." Cork bid her to seat herself, and she did so. She did not have her sister's or her mother's colouring, nor their chiseled beauty, but there was something strangely attractive about this tall dark-haired girl.

"I understand, Captain, that you are here to help us discover the fiend who did this thing, but you will have to bear with my mother's grief."

"To be sure. And what can you tell me, Miss Wilda?"

"I wish I could offer some clew, but my sister and I were not close—we did not exchange confidences."

"Was she in love with Brock van Loon?"

"Love!" she cried, and then did a strange thing. She giggled almost uncontrollably for a few seconds. "That's no word to use in this house, Captain."

"Wilda, my dear," a female voice said from the open door. "I think you are too upset to make much sense to-night. Perhaps in the morning, gentlemen?"

The speaker was the girls' aunt, Hetta van der Malin, and we rose as she entered.

"Forgive our intrusion into your sitting room, Ma'am," Cork said with a bow. "Perhaps you are right. Miss Wilda looks exhausted."

"I agree, Captain Cork," the aunt said, and she put her arm around the girl and ushered her out the door.

"Pray," Cork interrupted, "could *you* spare us some time in your niece's stead?"

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Her smile went faint, but it was a smile all the same. "How did you know this was *my* room, Captain? Oh, of course, Trask must have—"

"On the contrary, my eyes told me. Your older sister does not fit the image of a woman surrounded by knitting and mending and pert pillowcases."

"No, she doesn't. The den is Ilsa's sitting room. Our mother raised her that way. She is quite a capable person, you know."

"So it would seem. Miss Hetta, may I ask why you invited us here this evening?"

I was as caught off guard as she was.

"Whatever put that notion into your head? My sister dispatched the invitations herself."

"Precisely! That's why you had to purloin one and fill in our names yourself. Come, dear woman, the sample of your hand on the letters on your secretaire matches the hand that penned the unsigned note I received."

"You have looked through my things!"

"I snoop when forced to. Pretence will fail you, Ma'am, for the young lad who delivered this invitation will undoubtedly be found and will identify you. Come now, you wrote to invite me here and now you deny it. I will have an answer."

"Captain Cork," I cautioned him, for the woman was quivering.

"Yes, I sent it." Her voice was tiny and hollow. "But it had nothing to do with this horrible murder. It was trivial compared to it, and it is senseless to bring it up now. Please believe me, Captain. It was foolish of me."

"You said 'calamity' in your note, and now we have a murder done. Is that not the extreme of calamity?"

"Yes, of course it is. I used too strong a word in my note. I would gladly have told you about it after the coronation. But now it would just muddle things. I can't."

"Then, my dear woman, I must dig it out. Must I play the ferret while you play the mute?" His voice was getting sterner. I know how good an actor he is, but was he acting?

"Do you know what a colligation is, Madam?"

She shook her head.

"It is the orderly bringing together of isolated facts. Yet you blunt my efforts; half facts can lead to half truths. Do you want a half truth?" He paused and then spat it out. "Your sister may have killed her older daughter!"

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"That is unbearable!" she cried.

"A surmise based on a half truth. She was the last person to see Gretchen alive, if the Daws-Smith girl is to be believed. And why not believe her? If Lydia had killed Gretchen, would she then send the mother into the room to her corpse? Take the honour guard who were to carry the sedan chair: if Gretchen were alive when her mother left her, could one of those young men have killed her in the presence of five witnesses?"

"Anyone could have come in from the outside." Miss Hetta's voice was frantic.

"Nonsense. The evidence is against it."

"Why would Ilsa want to kill her own flesh and blood? It is unthinkable!"

"And yet people will think it, rest assured. The whole ugly affair can be whitewashed and pinned to some mysterious assailant who stalked in the night season, but people will think it just the same, Madam."

She remained silent now, and I could feel Cork's mind turning from one tactic to another, searching for leverage. He got to his feet and walked over to the portrait.

"So in the face of silence, I must turn the ferret loose in my mind. Take, for example, the question of this necklace."

"The van der Malin Chain," she said, looking up at the portrait. "What about it?"

"If the painter was accurate, it seems of great worth, both in pounds sterling and family prestige. Its very name proclaims it an heirloom."

"It is. It has been in our family for generations."

"Do you wear it at times?"

"No, of course not. It is my sister's property."

"Your estates are not commingled?"

"Our family holds with primogeniture."

"I do not. Exclusive rights to a first born make a fetish of nature's caprice. But that is philosophy, and beyond a ferret. Where is the necklace, Madam?"

"Why, in my sister's strong box, I assume. This is most confusing, Captain Cork."

I could have added my vote to that. I have seen Cork search for answers with hopscratch questions, but this display seemed futile.

"It is I who am confused, Madam. I am muddled by many things in this case. Why, for instance, didn't your sister wear this

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necklace to the year's most important social function? She thought enough of it to have it painted in a portrait for posterity."

"Our minds sometimes work that way, Captain. Perhaps it didn't suit her costume."

Cork turned from the picture as if he had had enough of it. "I am told there is an Uncle Kaarl in this household, yet he was not in attendance at the Bal to-night. Did he not suit the occasion?"

"You are most rude, sir. Kaarl is an ill man, confined to his bed for several years." She got to her feet. "I am very tired, gentlemen."

"I, too, grow weary, Madam. One last question. Your late niece was irritable this evening, I am told. Did something particular happen recently to cause that demeanour?"

"No. What would she have to sulk about? She was the centre of attraction. I really must retire now. Good night."

When the rustle of her skirts had faded down the silent hallway, I said, "Well, Captain, we've certainly had a turn around the mulberry bush."

He gave me that smirk-a-mouth of his. "Some day, Oaks, you will learn to read between the lines where women are concerned. I am sure you thought me a bully for mistreating her, but it was necessary, and it worked."

"Worked?"

"To a fair degree. I started on her with several assumptions. Some have more weight now, others are discounted. Don't look so perplexed. I am sure that Hetta's note to us did not concern Gretchen directly. She did not fear for the girl's life in this calamity she now chooses to keep secret."

"How is that?"

"Use your common sense, man. If she had suspected an attempt on her niece's life, would she stand mute? No, she would screech her accusations to the sky. Her seeking outside aid from us must have been for another problem. Yes, Trask?"

I hadn't seen the footman in the shadows, nor had I any idea how long he had been there.

"Beg pardon, Captain Cork, but Major Tell has retired to his room and would like to see you when you have a moment."

"Thank you, Trask. Is your mistress available to us now?"

"Her maid tells me she is abed, sir."

"A shame. Maybe you can help me, Trask. My friend and I were wondering why the Dame's picture hangs in this small room. I

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say it was executed in such a large size to hang in a larger room. Mr. Oaks, however, says it was meant for Miss Hetta's room as an expression of love between the two sisters."

"Well, there is an affection between them, sirs, but the fact is that the portrait hung in the Grand Salon until the Dame ordered it destroyed."

"When was this, Trask?"

"Two days ago. 'Trask,' she said to me, 'take that abomination out and burn it.' Strange, she did like it originally, then, just like that, she hated it. Of course, Miss Hetta wouldn't let me burn it, so we spirited it in here, where the Dame never comes."

"Ha, you see I was right, Oaks. Thanks for settling the argument, Trask. Where is Major Tell's room?"

"Right next to yours, if you'll follow me, gentlemen."

Tell's chamber was at the back of the house where we found him sitting in the unlighted room, looking out at the moonlit yard.

"Nothing yet, Major?" Cork asked, walking to the window to join him.

"Not a sign or a shadow. I have men hiding at the front and down there near the garden gate and over to the left by the stable. Do you really expect him to make a move?"

"Conjecture costs us nothing, although I have more information now."

Although the room was bathed in moonlight, as usual I was in the dark. "Would either of you gentlemen mind telling me what this is all about? *Who* is coming?"

"Going would be more like it," the Major said.

"Going—ah, I see! The killer hid himself in the house somewhere and you expect him to make a break for it when everyone is bedded down. But where could he have hidden? Your men searched the den and passageway for secret panels, did they not?"

"Ask your employer," Tell said. "I am only following his orders—hold on, Cork, look down by the passage door."

I looked over Cork's shoulder to catch a glimpse of a cloaked figure in a cockade, moving among the shadows towards the stable.

"Our mounts are ready, Major?" Tell nodded. "Excellent. Let us be off."

As I followed them downstairs, I remarked on my own puzzlement. "Why are we going to *follow* this scoundrel? Why not stop him and unmask him?"

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"Because I know who our mysterious figure is, Oaks. It is the destination that is the heart of the matter," Cork said as we hurried into the ballroom and back to the den door.

Once inside, I saw that Tell had placed our greatcoats in readiness and we bustled into them. Cork walked over to the weapon wall and looked at two empty hooks.

"A brace of pistols are gone. Our shadow is armed, as expected," he said.

"I'll take this one," I said, reaching for a ball-shot handgun.

"No need, Oaks," Cork said. "We are not the targets. Come, fellows, we want to be mounted and ready."

The night was cold as we waited behind a small knoll 20 yards down from the stable yard. Suddenly the doors of the stable burst open and a black stallion charged into the moonlight, bearing its rider to the south. "Now keep a small distance, but do not lose sight for a second," Cork commanded, and spurred his horse forward.

We followed through the drifts for ten minutes and saw our quarry turn into a small alley. When we reached the spot, we found the lathered mount tied to a stairway which went up the side of the building to a door on the second-storey landing. With Cork in the lead, we went up the cold stairs and assembled ourselves in front of the door. "Now!" Cork whispered, and we butted our shoulders against the wood panelling and fell into the room.

Our cloaked figure had a terrified man at gunpoint. The victim was a man in his forties, coiled into a corner. I was about to rush the person with the pistols when the tricornered hat turned to reveal the chiselled face and cold blue eyes of Dame Ilsa van Schooner.

"Drop the pistols, Madam, you are only compounding your problem," Cork said firmly.

"He murdered my child!"

"I swear, Dame Ilsa!" The man groveled before her. His voice was foreign in inflection. "Please, you must hear me out. Yes, I am scum, but I am not a murderer."

Cork walked forward and put his hands over the pistol barrels. For a split second, the Dame looked up at him and her stern face went soft. "He's going to pay," she said.

"Yes, but not for your daughter's death."

"But only he could have—" She caught herself up in a flash of thought. Her lips quivered and she released the pistol butts into

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Cork's control. He took her by the arm and guided her to a chair.

The tension was broken, and I took my first look about. It was a large and comfortable bachelor's room. Then I saw the work area at the far end—with an easel, palettes, and paint pots.

"The painter! He's Jan der Trogue, the one who painted the portrait."

"You know about the painting?" the Dame said with surprise.

I started to tell her about seeing it in her sister's sitting-room, but never got it out. Der Trogue had grabbed the pistol that Cork had stupidly left on the table and pointed it at us as he edged towards the open door. "Stay where you are," he warned. "I owe you my life, sir." He bowed to Cork. "But it is not fitting to die at a woman's hands."

"Nor a hangman's," Cork said. "For you will surely go to the gallows for your other crime."

"Not this man, my fine fellow. Now stay where you are and no one will get hurt." He whirled out onto the landing and started to race down the stairs. Cork walked to the door. To my surprise, he had the other pistol in his hand. He stepped out onto the snowy landing.

"Defend yourself!" Cork cried. Then, after a tense moment, Cork took careful aim and fired. I grimaced as I heard der Trogue's body tumbling down the rest of the stairs.

Cork came back into the room with the smoking pistol in his hand. "Be sure your report says 'fleeing arrest,' Major," he said, shutting the door.

"Escape from what? You said he didn't kill the girl! This is most confusing and, to say the least, irregular!"

"Precisely put, Major. Confusing from the start and irregular for a finish. But first to the irregularity. What we say, see, and do here to-night stays with us alone." He turned to the Dame. "We will have to search the room. Will you help, since you have been here before?"

"Yes." She got up and started to open drawers and cupboards. She turned to us and held out a black felt bag which Cork opened.

"Gentlemen, I give you the van der Malin Chain, and quite exquisite it is."

"So he did steal it," I said.

"In a manner of speaking, Oaks, yes. But, Madam, should we not also find what you were so willing to pay a king's ransom for?"

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"Perhaps it is on the easel. I only saw the miniature."

Cork took the drape from the easel and revealed a portrait of a nude woman reposing on a couch.

"It's Gretchen!" I gasped. "Was that der Trogue's game? Blackmail?"

"Yes, Mr. Oaks, it was," the Dame said. "I knew it was not an artist's trick of painting one head on another's body. That strawberry mark on the thigh was Gretchen's. How did you know of its existence, Captain? I told no one, not even my sister."

"Your actions helped tell me. You ordered your own portrait burned two days ago, the same day your sister sent me a note and an invitation to the Masque."

"A note?"

"Portending calamity," I added.

"Oh, the fool. She must have learned about my failure to raise enough cash to meet that fiend's demands."

"Your sudden disdain for a fine portrait betrayed your disgust with the artist, not with the art. Then Wilda told us that you had planned to have your daughters painted by the same man and, considering the time elapsed since your portrait was finished, I assumed that Gretchen's had been started."

"It was, and he seduced her. She confessed it to me after I saw the miniature he brought to me."

"Why did you not demand its delivery when you gave him the necklace to-night?"

"I never said I gave it to him to-night."

"But you did. You went into the den, not to see your daughter, but to meet der Trogue at the outside passage door. You lit a taper there, and he examined his booty at the entryway, and then left, probably promising to turn over that scandalous painting when he had verified that the necklace was not an imitation."

"Captain, you sound as if you were there."

"The clews were. In the puddle just inside the door, there was a red substance. Oaks believed it was blood. It was a natural assumption, but when the question of your anger with a painter came to light, I considered what my eyes now confirm. Painters are sloppy fellows; look at this floor. Besides, blood is rarely magenta. It was paint, red paint from his boot soles. Then, Madam, your part of the bargain completed, you returned to the den. Your daughter was still by the fire."

"Yes."

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"And you returned to the ballroom."

"Yes, leaving my soiled child to be murdered! He came back and killed her!"

"No, Dame van Schooner, he did not, although that is the way it will be recorded officially. The report will show that you entered the den and presented the van der Malin Chain to your daughter to wear on her night of triumph. My observation of the paint in the puddle will stand as the deduction that led us to der Trogue. We will say he gained entry into the house, killed your daughter, and took the necklace. And was later killed resisting capture."

"But he *did* kill her!" the Dame insisted. "He had to be the one! She was alive when I left her. No one else entered the room until the honour guard went for her."

Cork took both her hands.

"Dame van Schooner, I have twisted truth beyond reason for your sake to-night, but now you must face the hard truth. Der Trogue was a scoundrel, but he had no reason to kill Gretchen. What would he gain? And how could he get back in without leaving snow tracks? Gretchen's executioner was in the den all the time—when Lydia was there, when you were. I think in your heart you know the answer—if you have the courage to face it."

To watch her face was to see ice melt. Her eyes, her cold, diamond-blue eyes watered. "I can. But must it be said—here?"

"Yes."

"Wilda. Oh, my God, Wilda."

"Yes, Wilda. You have a great burden to bear, my dear lady."

Her tears came freely now. "The curse of the van Schooners," she cried. "Her father was insane, and his brother Kaarl lives in his lunatic's attic. My mother thought she was infusing quality by our union."

"Thus your stern exterior and addiction to purifying the bloodline with good stock."

"Yes, I have been the man in our family far too long. I have had to be hard. I thank you for your consideration, Captain. Wilda will have to be put away, of course. Poor child, I saw the van Schooner blood curse in her years ago, but I never thought it would come to this." The last was a sob. Then she took a deep breath. "I think I am needed at home." She rose. "Thank you again, Captain. Will you destroy that?" She pointed to the portrait.

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"Rest assured."

As he opened the door for her, she turned back with the breaking dawn framing her. "I wish it was I who had invited you to the Bal. I saw you dancing and wondered who you were. You are quite tall."

"Not too tall to bow, Madam," Cork said, and all six-foot-six of him bent down and kissed her cheek. She left us with an escort from the detachment of soldiers that had followed our trail.

The room was quiet for a moment before Major Tell exploded. "Confound it, Cork, what the deuce is this? I am to falsify records to show der Trogue was a thief and a murderer and yet you say it was Wilda who killed her sister. What's your proof, man?"

Cork walked over to the painting and smashed it on a chair back. "You deserve particulars, both of you. I said that Wilda was in the den all the time. Your natural query is how did she get there unseen? Well, we all saw her. She was carried in—in the curtained sedan chair. In her twisted mind, she hated her sister, who would inherit everything by her mother's design. One does not put a great fortune into a madwoman's hands."

"Very well," Tell said, "I can see her entry. How the deuce did she get out?"

"Incipient madness sometimes makes the mind clever, Major. She stayed in the sedan chair until her mother had left, then presented herself to Gretchen."

"And killed her," I interjected. "But she was back in the ballroom before the honour guard went in to get her sister."

"There is the nub of it, Oaks. She left the den by the back passage, crossed the yard, and re-entered the house by the kitchen in the far wing. Who would take any notice of a daughter of the house in a room filled with bustling cooks and servants coming and going with vittles for the buffet?"

"But she would have gotten her skirts wet in the snow," I started to object. "Of course! The spilled punch bowl! It drenched her!"

Cork smiled broadly. "Yes, my lad. She entered the kitchen, scooped up the punch bowl, carried it into the ballroom, and then deliberately dropped it."

"Well," Tell grumped, "she may be sprung in the mind, but she understands the theory of tactical diversion."

"Self-preservation is the last instinct to go, Major."

"Yes, I believe you are right, Cork, but how are we to explain

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all this and still shield the Dame's secret?"

Cork looked dead at me. "You, Oaks, have given us the answer."

"I? Oh, when I said the killer took off his boots to avoid tracks in the den? You rejected that out of hand when I mentioned it."

"I rejected it as a probability, not a possibility. Anything is possible, but not everything is probable. Is it probable that a killer bent on not leaving tracks would take off his boots *inside* the entry where they would leave a puddle? No, I couldn't accept it, but I'm sure the general public will."

The major looked disturbed. "I can appreciate your desire to protect the Dame," he said, "but to *suppress* evidence—"

"Calm yourself, Major, we are just balancing the books of human nature. I have saved the Crown the time and expense of trying and executing an extortionist. God knows how many victims he has fleeced by his artistic trickery over the years. And we have prevented the Dame from the commission of a homicide that any jury, I think, would have found justifiable. Let it stand as it is, Major, it is a neater package. The Dame has had enough tragedy in her life."

The last of his words were soft and low-toned, and I watched as he stared into the flames. By jing, could it possibly be that this gallivanting, sunburnt American had fallen in love? But I quickly dismissed the thought. We are fated to our roles, we two—he, the unbroken stallion frolicking from pasture to pasture, and I, the frantic ostler following with an empty halter, hoping some day to put the beast to work. I persist.

"Q"

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A memorable story with subtle and sinister touches—about Mr. Golding, a corporation lawyer, and the running man. . .a story that Edgar Allan Poe would have liked and praised. . .

THE RUNNING MAN

by DAVID ELY

It was at the shore that Mr. Golding first saw the running man. Each morning Mr. Golding and his wife crossed the dunes to their favorite spot, well back from the beach. Mrs. Golding rubbed herself with lotion, and lay down in the sun. Mr. Golding, having established himself in his camp chair, opened his book to read. From time to time his attention would stray to the water, where children played and bathers plunged into the surf.

With the slow passage of the lazy days of his vacation he came to recognize the families who spread their towels in the same places at the same hours, and the couples who regularly walked along the shore—and so it was that he became accustomed to the sight of the runner, who appeared every morning at about ten o'clock, speeding along at the water's edge with long swift strides.

Watching the young man race by, Mr. Golding was reminded of a summer some 40 years before, when he too had run along the beach each day, to stay in condition for his college track team. When had it been—1934? 1935? He recalled how vigorously he had sprinted across the hard-packed sand with all the force and energy of his young manhood. He might have been elected captain, but he had quit the team that fall, after reading somewhere that running could enlarge the heart and cut years off one's life—a prudent decision, he now reflected, for otherwise he might not be sitting here in the sun, breathing the fresh salt air.

Mr. Golding was not a nostalgic man, but his memories had been stirred, and he mentioned the young runner to his wife. She took no interest in the subject, however, so he returned to his

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book. Still, he kept thinking about the runner, and found himself glancing along the beach each morning as the hour of ten approached.

"Here he comes, that young fellow I told you about," he remarked to his wife one day. "See?"

Mrs. Golding, annoyed at having her sunning interrupted, raised herself unwillingly on her elbows to look. "Where?" she asked, squinting.

Mr. Golding pointed along the beach. "Over there. You're looking the wrong way. Well, it's too late now. He's gone."

The next morning Mr. Golding alerted her as soon as he saw the running figure in the distance, but by the time she had turned over and sat up and put on her sunglasses, the runner had raced by. On the third morning, after Mrs. Golding had once more missed her opportunity to see the runner, Mr. Golding suggested rather tartly that she might profit from a visit to an eye specialist, and made no further reference to the running man.

It occurred to him that he might take a closer look at the young runner. This would have meant a break in his schedule, however—he never went down to the water for his swim before eleven—and he was above all a man of habit and precision. He always wore a tie and jacket to supper at the hotel for example, and his tips were calculated to the penny. At the beach he carefully picked up any pebbles that happened to be in his path, and made a neat little pile of them near his chair—for what reason, he couldn't have said, except that he had done it on the first day and had kept on doing it since.

In any case, it was improbable that a man like Mr. Golding would alter his routine by going down to the water at ten o'clock simply to peer at some unknown young fellow running by there; and yet one morning, somewhat to his surprise, he did go down early. He didn't realize it until he was actually there, and took a look at his watch. Why, he must have misread it. He was an hour ahead of time! And he should have left the watch on top of his book, as he always did. Now he'd have to take it back up to his chair.

Still, Mr. Golding did not turn back. He remained at the water's edge, waiting.

It was hot that day. The breeze had died, and the sea lay flat. Its glassy surface fired light into his eyes, and the heat constricted his breathing. Oddly enough, he heard what sounded like

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surf, faintly booming far away—and yet there was no surf that day. He turned his head—and saw the running man appear in the distance.

Squinting that way, Mr. Golding experienced a visual distortion, for the heated air rising from the sand made the runner look much larger than he should have seemed. The mirage effect diminished as the young man sped closer, so that, to Mr. Golding, the runner remained the same size, appearing to be suspended in space.

This trick of light gave Mr. Golding a sensation of displacement, as though he himself might be somewhere he was not. He realized that he could re-establish his perspective by looking elsewhere; yet he kept watching the runner, even though he no longer really wanted to, for there was rising in him a disturbing awareness of some disarray in the natural order of things that counseled him to leave.

Still, he remained where he was, the sand sucking at his feet and his eyes unwillingly fixed on the apparently hovering runner.

Despite the heat of the sun Mr. Golding felt a strange, premonitory chill. It seemed to him that something unpleasant was about to happen. He sought to move; he could not. Nor could he tear his gaze away from the running man. Everything else seemed to fade away. It was as if the beach had emptied of people, and he and the young runner were the only ones there, as if the sky, the sand, and the water, too, all had vanished, stranding him in some unknown world.

In those few but seemingly endless moments Mr. Golding stood numbed and helpless, his heart pounding as though he, not the other, were the runner, and it was then that he saw clearly for the first time the expression on the young man's face—a look of such piercing sorrow and reproach that Mr. Golding, in his astonishment, felt himself seized by an answering surge of anguish.

Then the runner flashed by, and was gone. Mr. Golding swayed, momentarily dizzied. The beach bloomed once more before his eyes; he heard the cries of children, and saw the swimmers in the water. He noticed that he had sunk to his ankles in the wet sand. With an effort he pulled his feet free and plodded back up the dunes, shaken and bewildered.

"What's wrong?" his wife inquired, looking up at him from her towel.

Mr. Golding shook his head, and eased himself down into his

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chair. "I must have gotten too much sun," he muttered.

He sat staring out at the horizon for a while. Then, his voice stronger, he remarked as casually as he was able, "You know, Sheila, I think I've had enough of the beach for this summer. Let's go back home."

The Goldings lived in Boston, in the house they had bought when they were married. It was too large for their needs—they had hoped to have children, but Mrs. Golding had always miscarried; yet they had remained there for convenience, since it was just across the Common from Mr. Golding's law office—and it was there, in the park, that Mr. Golding again saw the running man.

Mr. Golding rose early in the summer in order to arrive at work while the air was still fresh. He liked the Common then, for few people were about, and the birds sang undisturbed. At that hour it wasn't unusual to see men jogging on the paths for exercise. One of the residents of Mr. Golding's block, in fact, donned a sweatshirt every morning for a pre-breakfast trot.

When Mr. Golding glimpsed a running figure in the distance on one particular August morning, his first impression was that it was his middle-aged neighbor. But this runner was young and lithe, and moved with swift strides. Mr. Golding, having taken a second look, hastened his own pace. He tried to persuade himself that it was some other young man, although he knew instinctively who it had to be.

He had no intention of stopping and turning, but he found himself doing so all the same. The young man raced toward him across the brown and dusty grass. His sweatshirt had something lettered on it—the name of a college, perhaps—but Mr. Golding hardly noticed that. It was the runner's face that commanded his attention. Again there was that look of sorrow and reproach, and it wrung from Mr. Golding the same inexplicable distress he'd felt before.

And then the running man sped by, and Mr. Golding was left confounded, in the clutch of a causeless remorse. He sat on the nearest bench, trying to compose himself. In the name of God who was it? He hadn't the faintest recollection of ever having seen the fellow before, although he couldn't be absolutely sure; but in any event there was nothing to justify that rending glance of sadness, or his own puzzling reaction.

It must be sheer coincidence, thought Mr. Golding. He had seen

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the young man at the beach; now he had seen him on the Common. There was nothing extraordinary in that. As for the runner's peculiar expression, it was in all likelihood the grimace of physical effort. Nothing to worry about, Mr. Golding told himself firmly.

But he no longer went to work at that early hour, and he chose a roundabout route to his office, avoiding the Common.

The next time it happened was in a restaurant a few days later, when Mr. Golding was lunching with Judge Barnes. The young man wasn't running, but he was moving quickly. He seemed to be a busboy hurrying past with a tray of dishes just as Mr. Golding glanced up, but in the confusion of the moment Mr. Golding couldn't be sure. All he knew was that it was the same young man, for he caught that unmistakable piteous look, and felt again the pang in his own heart.

Mr. Golding fiddled with his food and kept glancing about uneasily. He didn't see the mysterious busboy again, but after he and Judge Barnes had paid their bill and left, he noticed the young man across the street.

"Look over there," said Mr. Golding sharply. "See that young fellow—?"

But Judge Barnes was too slow, and near-sighted besides. "What young fellow?" he asked, peering about in vain, for the young man had vanished into the midday crowd. "Never mind," said Mr. Golding.

As Mr. Golding was leaving his office building the next day, he saw the running man rush by in the crowd. The following morning, as he was buying a newspaper on Tremont Street, he noticed him striding past. The day after, Mr. Golding saw him racing for a bus on State Street. On each occasion he caught from him, if only for an instant, that same mystifying look of tormented reproof. Could all this be coincidence? Mr. Golding began to fear it was not.

The running man's appearances came with increasing frequency, at unexpected moments of the day. Mr. Golding could hardly walk a block without at least a fleeting glimpse of that mournful face. The young man hurried out of elevators that Mr. Golding was waiting to use, and he was among the movie-goers streaming out of theaters that Mr. Golding was about to enter. If Mr. Golding took a taxi, he would see him crossing a street, or rounding a corner.

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One afternoon, looking up from his desk, Mr. Golding saw him glance in at the open office door, and then pass quickly on. Mr. Golding rushed out to the corridor. It was empty. He questioned his secretary, but she had been busy at the file cabinet, and hadn't seen anyone.

"It must have been a messenger," she said. "I'll speak to him if he comes in again. What does he look like?"

But Mr. Golding really didn't know what the young man looked like.

This episode disturbed Mr. Golding. It was bad enough to keep encountering that ubiquitous young man in public places, but it was intolerable to have his own premises invaded. Who the devil was the man? What did he want? If he had some grievance, why didn't he speak out plainly about it instead of casting those hurt and agonized looks? Mr. Golding tried to think of someone who might conceivably have a grudge against him, but there was no one he had wronged, no one.

He began working with his door closed, although that made the room stuffy. When he stepped out of his office, he glanced around suspiciously for his unknown pursuer. At home he became sulky and subdued; at work he grew snappish. He had always been physically lean, but now he was becoming drawn and wasted. He was losing sleep and eating poorly. His nerves were ragged too. One afternoon as he was passing the Parker House, the young man swung around the corner and hurried toward him.

"Now see here," Mr. Golding rapped out sharply. He tried to block the way, but the young man sidestepped him and passed on. "You'll pay for this!" cried out Mr. Golding.

He set off in pursuit, but collided with someone, and paused to apologize. In the meantime the young man had vanished, leaving Mr. Golding peering all about and muttering under his breath.

"You all right, Pop?" a passerby asked, taking him by the elbow. Mr. Golding angrily shook off the hand, and went on his way, humiliated.

"I've got to put an end to this," he kept thinking. He considered going to the police. But what complaint could he make? That some young fellow was going about giving him reproachful glances? Why, they'd think *he* was the crazy one!

He finally decided to seek advice from an old friend, George Sloan, a tax specialist who had his office on the floor above, and

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whose experience and judgment were frequently sought by Mr. Golding on professional problems.

At the conclusion of one of these discussions Mr. Golding broached the matter in an off-hand manner. "I've got a little personal difficulty, George," he said. "There's some young fellow who keeps showing up wherever I go. I don't know whether he's following me or not, but it's a peculiar situation."

As he recounted the story of the running man, Mr. Golding felt calmer. Mr. Sloan's office had a soothing regularity of décor, and the tax lawyer, a portly and confident man, was listening with sober attention. ". . . the whole thing is very annoying to me," Mr. Golding concluded, "and I simply don't know how to handle it."

"It may be a case of mistaken identity," suggested Mr. Sloan. "You may resemble someone who's treated this fellow badly."

"I thought of that," said Mr. Golding. "If it had happened once or twice, I might agree—but it's been going on for weeks, several times a day. No, he knows me, all right. He knows where I work, and the places I go for lunch. He pops up everywhere!"

"You're sure you've never met him?"

"Oh, I couldn't swear to it. Everybody under the age of thirty looks more or less the same to me now," said Mr. Golding, "and besides, the fellow goes by so quickly I don't get more than a glimpse of him. But whether I've met him or not in the past, I certainly don't remember him, and there's no justification for the way he looks at me—as if I'd done him some injury."

"Well, just to cover all possibilities," said Mr. Sloan, "let me ask *you if you've ever caused injury to anyone—unintentionally, of* course. An automobile accident, for example."

"Never," replied Mr. Golding. "I've never had an accident of any kind."

"What about neighbors? Have you had any trouble with neighbors—or relatives?"

"No, no trouble whatever," said Mr. Golding firmly. "You know me, George. I'm not the sort of man who looks for trouble. I never have been. I don't know whether I've ever mentioned this to you, but back in the Thirties, when I was a law student, several of us volunteered for the Loyalist side of the Spanish civil war—oh, I was quite a firebrand in those days—but at the last minute I didn't go. I couldn't stand the idea that I might kill someone, even for a cause I believed in." He sighed, and shook his head. "I've never hurt a soul, George. Not only that, I've always gone out of

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my way to avoid getting into a position where I might inadvertently injure others. In fact, I gave up criminal practice for just that reason."

"I didn't know you'd ever practiced criminal law."

"It wasn't for long. Just for a few months, when I was fresh out of law school. I had a vision of myself defending penniless clients—you know how idealistic young men are. But I was very much aware of my youth and inexperience. I was worried about making a mistake that might send some poor devil to prison. I didn't want that kind of responsibility—and that's why I decided to switch over to corporate law."

Mr. Golding smiled a wry little smile. "It hasn't been the sort of career I once imagined—but it's had its own rewards—and I've done my level best, George. I've played fair with everybody—everybody!"

He frowned down at his clasped hands then, for he remembered an exception, but he decided not to mention it. He'd betrayed his wife once with a secretary. It must have been 20 years ago. He'd got worried about it after a few weeks, though, and persuaded the girl to break off the affair. She'd taken a job elsewhere. But his wife hadn't known about it, of that he was sure.

No harm done, thought Mr. Golding. He glanced up at his friend. "Well, George, what do you think about all this?"

"It seems obvious that this young man is some sort of crank," said Mr. Sloan. "Still, he may be harmless. He hasn't threatened you, has he?"

"Well, no," admitted Mr. Golding. "He hasn't—not yet, anyway. But the fact remains that it's a damned impertinent intrusion into my life, and I'd like to find some way of putting an end to it."

"I don't blame you," remarked Mr. Sloan, with a glance at his watch. "You say you see him every day? What about my taking a look at him, then, just to size him up?"

"Well, that would be very kind of you, George," said Mr. Golding. For some reason, however, he found that he was not eager to accept Mr. Sloan's friendly offer. "But I've already taken up enough of your time as it is—"

"Not at all," interrupted Mr. Sloan, rising to his feet. "Let's go out right now and see if he shows his face."

Mr. Golding rose too. "Really, I can't ask you to go to so much trouble," he said uncertainly, greatly puzzled by his mounting reluctance. "Perhaps some other day, when you're not as busy."

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"Nonsense," said Mr. Sloan heartily, conducting Mr. Golding to the door. "We'll just stop at your office for your hat, and then we'll go out and see what happens."

The two men walked along Washington Street, and it was in front of Filene's that Mr. Golding saw the running man. "There he is," he exclaimed, but the fellow vanished in the crowd of shoppers before Mr. Sloan could pick him out. A few minutes later Mr. Golding spotted his quarry entering a drug store, but by the time he and Mr. Sloan had gone inside, the runner was no longer there, presumably having left by another door.

"He's like lightning," complained Mr. Golding. "That's the problem. I catch a glimpse of him, and then he's gone."

He and Mr. Sloan made a similar tour the following day, at Sloan's insistence, and although Mr. Golding saw the running man on four separate occasions, his friend wasn't quick enough to spot him. They headed back toward the office.

"It would help if you could give me a clearer description," Mr. Sloan remarked.

Mr. Golding sighed. "It's a look he has, that's all," he said defensively. Then he stopped short. "There he is—right across the street. See? In the brown jacket!"

Mr. Sloan took a look. "Well, I see a man in a brown jacket," he said, "but didn't you say he was wearing a gray suit before?"

Mr. Golding was puzzled. "Why, yes, that's true," he said. "He *was* in gray—at least I think he was." He stared intently across the street, but the young man in the brown jacket was gone. "Perhaps I made a mistake," Mr. Golding muttered. Mr. Sloan made no comment. "It may have been someone who resembled him," Mr. Golding added. He suddenly felt terribly tired and old.

As they continued along the street, he saw the running man again, hurrying into a camera store, but he couldn't tell whether he was wearing brown or gray, and said nothing about it to Sloan. When they entered the lobby of the office building, Mr. Golding thought he saw the young man once more—just the flash of his face among the office workers crowded into an elevator whose doors were closing—but he couldn't be sure.

"We'll give it another try tomorrow," said Mr. Sloan, but without enthusiasm. He wasn't looking at Mr. Golding.

"I don't think I'll be coming to the office tomorrow," said Mr. Golding. . .

He stayed home the next day. At noon he stepped outside, in-

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tending to go to the corner to buy a newspaper, but when he saw someone a block away running his way along the sidewalk, he went back inside, and remained there the rest of the day and the day after that. On the third day, irritated by having him around the house, his wife announced that she was going up to Marblehead to visit her sister for a few days. Mr. Golding thought of going, too, but he could tell that his wife didn't want his company.

That evening he heard footsteps outside, the rapid steps of someone running, steps that beat up swiftly, drummed by, and sank in the distance. Mr. Golding went to the telephone in the front hall. "This must stop," he said under his breath.

The police number was on an emergency list tucked in at one corner of the hall mirror. Mr. Golding dialed, his hands trembling. But he immediately replaced the receiver. By the time the police arrived, the running man would be far away.

He went back to the living room and turned on the television, with the volume high. Now he couldn't hear the steps outside. But then he wondered: suppose the runner came right up to the house? He turned off the television and went to the window, pulling the curtain aside to peer out. No, the street was empty. He looked through the peephole in the front door to be sure no one was on the stoop. Then he opened the door.

It was a misty evening, with a touch of fall in the air. The street lamps cast a damp, smeared glow. When he heard the steps in the distance, he fought the impulse to leap back in and slam the door. His breath quickened and his heart pounded. Where the devil was the runner? Ah, there he came, a dark figure swiftly striding.

"Who's that?" called out Mr. Golding, his voice cracking. He cleared his throat. "Who's that?" he called again. The runner sped along the sidewalk, drawing closer. "Stop," shouted Mr. Golding from his doorway. "You there—stop! Who are you? What do you want?" But the runner raced by and was gone.

Mr. Golding returned to the telephone and dialed Mr. Sloan's number. "It's happening all the time, George," he said, trying to keep his voice steady. "That fellow, he's after me day and night. Just a minute ago he ran right by the house."

"Try not to think about it," Mr. Sloan advised him. "Do something to take your mind off the subject. Play a game of cards with your wife, or get her to read to you."

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"Well, my wife's not here. She's gone up to her sister's for a few days."

"You shouldn't be alone," said Mr. Sloan.

"You're right, George. I realize that. Look, I'll just get in the car and drive up there—"

"I wouldn't drive, if I were you."

"Nonsense. I'm perfectly all right."

"Isn't there a neighbor who would come in and stay with you?"

Mr. Golding made no reply. He was straining his attention, listening for the running man. "Wait a minute," he whispered. He thought he could hear him now, his steps echoing faintly in the distance. "He's coming back." He laid the receiver down and rushed to the door, pulling it open. "Can you hear them, George?" he puffed, having snatched up the phone again. But there was silence outside. "No, I was wrong. He's not coming, not now. But he'll be along any minute now. He never leaves me alone—"

"You'd better get a neighbor to come over," Mr. Sloan repeated.

"If I'd ever done anything to deserve it—but I haven't. My God, I've never done anything," said Mr. Golding, his voice shaking. He was staring through the open door at the misty street. "I could have been a runner, too, but—" He broke off, squinting intently, his head tilted as he listened. "No . . . not yet. He's waiting."

Mr. Sloan was continuing to urge him to get someone to stay with him, but Mr. Golding paid no attention. "I've lived a careful life, George," he said, keeping his voice low so he could hear the running man when he came. "I've avoided risks of any kind, to myself and others. That's why this is so—so intolerable. If I'd gone to Spain—but I *didn't* go!"

He stiffened. "Here he comes," he whispered. There was no doubt about it now. The footsteps were far away, but coming closer. "Can you understand my feelings, George? To be persecuted for what I haven't done? It's so damned unfair—after I quit trial work, after I gave up the only woman who ever gave me any real tenderness and—"

He hurried to the door. The running man was sprinting along the street. "Stop—stop!" shouted Mr. Golding. His eyes were teary from the strain. He could barely see the figure hurtling through the mist. "Stop—in the name of God, stop!"

Mr. Golding's throat burned from the force of his outcry, and he was choked with sobs. "Please . . . please . . ." He was gasping; his tears blinded him. He could hear the steps, but saw nothing. He

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turned and fumbled his way back inside, wiping his eyes on his sleeve. From the telephone receiver he heard Sloan calling his name. Mr. Golding stood panting in the hall. His heart was slamming in his chest.

He lifted the receiver. "Did you hear the steps, George?" he whispered, and then he saw something in the mirror. "Oh, my God, he's inside. He's in the house now!"

He whirled about. The hall was empty. He could see into the living room, and it was empty too. "No," whispered Mr. Golding. "I made a mistake. He didn't come in. He—"

He raised his eyes slowly to the mirror. He knew now what he had seen there, and what he would see again—that terrible gaze of sorrow and accusation. He stared at it, anguish storming within him.

When he spoke, his voice was dry and clear. "I'm sorry, George," he said. "There was something I didn't mention. I'd forgotten." He seemed to see before him, as in a dream, the sunlit beach, and someone running. "There was a young man once," said Mr. Golding softly. "Many years ago . . ."

He replaced the receiver, and stood gazing at the memory of what he had killed until it blurred in his tears, and he could no longer make it out.

"Q"

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THE DARK INTUITION

by HUGH PENTECOST

Dixon Childs, diplomat extraordinary, was a big broad-shouldered man with iron-gray hair and an aristocratically boned face. He had a wide white smile which, if you were his enemy, could chill your blood. If you were his friend that smile could delude you into believing that you were his oldest, dearest, and closest friend. It was all play-acting to Dixon Childs. He always presented that aspect of himself that would best promote his cause, and his cause was Dixon Childs—a man destined, he hoped, for the Presidency of the United States of America.

The man sitting across from Childs in the diplomat's posh suite at the Beaumont Hotel in New York also had a cause. His cause had led him to come to Childs with a warning.

Childs gave this man his intermediate smile, the one that neither rejected nor embraced. It was tentative. It meant that he had not made a final judgment on his visitor. "I'm sorry, Mr. Dark," Childs said, "but I'm afraid I don't have time to listen to your spy-story fantasies."

Jason Dark was a man in his fifties, a small square man with mild eyes that studied Childs through faintly tinted wire-rimmed glasses. He looked like a retired schoolteacher, and not like the tough cop he had been for 22 years and the equally tough private investigator he had been for five. The most noticeable thing about

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him was his right hand, which was encased in a black glove. It wasn't really a hand at all, only a plastic imitation.

"You must know better than I do, Mr. Childs, the enormous power of today's multinational corporations," Dark said, in a quiet voice. "General Motors is bigger than Switzerland, Pakistan, and South Africa put together. Dutch Shell is bigger than Iran, Venezuela, and Turkey. Goodyear Tire is bigger than Saudi Arabia. Quadrant International is bigger than the two next biggest. Quadrant International is not going to let you accomplish your upcoming mission to Africa."

"Why?" Childs asked, his smile beginning to freeze. The smoke from an expensive cigar curled around his head.

"Because you are an honest man," Dark said.

"Oh, come, Mr. Dark, do you really think—?"

"They can't afford to let you expose the truth," Dark said. "The situation is simple enough. There is a revolution taking place in an African country, one of those we call a 'newly emerging nation.' We have been told that the Communists are supplying arms, munitions, and money to one side, threatening the peace of Southern Africa. It has only recently been hinted that we, the United States, have been supplying arms, munitions, and money to the other side. The Congress is distressed. That is why you are headed for Africa, as a kind of roving ambassador from the Congress, to find out the truth.

"The Congress, Mr. Childs, doesn't want another Vietnam in Africa. What you will find is that Quadrant International has supplied the arms and munitions for our side to the tune of a hundred million dollars, maybe more. Quadrant will continue to grow richer and more powerful, shielded by politicians whose election campaigns Quadrant has financed. You can't be allowed to get the evidence that will prove this and expose the truth."

"Are you suggesting that Quadrant International will let out a contract on me, Mr. Dark? An attack on me would launch a full-scale investigation that would never let up till they came to the truth. Quadrant International may try to bluff me, befuddle me, use the wool-over-the-eyes department. But my physical safety—never." He flicked the ash from his cigar into a tray on the table.

"It won't come by way of a wild-eyed assassin with a smoking gun," Dark said. "I suggest you will die of a heart attack."

Childs laughed. "I just had a physical checkup. My doctor tells me I have the heart of a boy of twenty."

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"Did he tell you you were immune to poison, Mr. Childs?"

"My dear Mr. Dark, you have been reading the newspaper accounts of covert actions by the C.I.A.—a powder sprinkled on a dictator's shoes that would make his beard drop out, poisoned chewing gum that will make his teeth fall out. The dream-ups of sick children. I get the feeling that Quadrant International is an obsession with you, Dark."

Dark hesitated. Then, with his left hand, he pulled up the right sleeve of his jacket, and the sleeve of his black knit turtlenecked shirt. He never wore a tie because he couldn't knot a tie with his left hand alone. What was revealed was a harness attached to the stump of his left arm, to which was fastened the plastic hand, covered by the black glove. A flicker of pity showed in Dixon Child's eyes.

Dark rolled down the two sleeves and leaned back in his chair. He spoke in a flat toneless voice that was meant to hide any kind of emotion. "About a year and a half ago I was working on a case for a client," he said. "Along the way I stumbled on some information about Quadrant International. It was unrelated to the case I was working on. But I made some notes on Quadrant, and I taped two conversations I'd had with an informant. I put the notes and the tapes away in a safe place—in case they might be useful.

"One night I got a message from my informant asking me to meet him after hours in the kitchen of the restaurant where he worked. He had something hot, the message said. I went to the restaurant. It was a setup. I was attacked by two men wearing ski masks. Where were my notes, they demanded. Where were my tapes? I knew if I told them I was a dead man."

Dark moistened lips that had gone dry. "They tied my right hand to the butcher's block. Where were my notes and tapes? Then one of the men took the butcher's cleaver and brought the flat side down on my hand, breaking the bones."

"Good lord!" Childs said.

"It went on," Dark said, in his flat monotone, "until every bone in my hand was crushed. Then the man in the ski mask began to hack at the crushed hand with the blade edge of the cleaver until my hand was shredded." Dark drew a deep breath. "I screamed a lot. I have no pride about being stoical. Then, half conscious, I was dragged out into Central Park and left to bleed to death. A park policeman found me and saved my life. No one could save my hand."

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Dark's eyes were narrowed slits behind his wire-rimmed glasses. "Yes, I do have an obsession about Quadrant International, Mr. Childs. I am going to destroy the man who ordered this!" He held up the black-gloved plastic hand. "The best way to destroy him is to destroy his empire. But along the way, when a decent man like yourself is in danger, I let myself be sidetracked to give a warning. You are to attend a banquet here in the Beaumont tonight at which you are to be the main speaker. Am I right?"

"Yes." Childs sounded a little shaken.

"I suggest that you will have a heart attack before you ever get to speak a word. I suggest that you find an excuse—ill health, whatever—not to attend."

"Impossible!"

"Then I suggest you eat nothing, drink nothing—and try prayer," Dark said.

Jason Dark's tiny duplex apartment in an old brownstone house on East Fortieth Street had a warm lived-in feel to it. The walls of the living room were crammed with books on shelves that rose to the high ceiling. There was a desk near the front windows, littered with papers, news clippings, letters, notebooks. It was like a No Man's Land in the center of order. The old Persian rug that covered the floor was a museum piece. Flowers in vases and the spick and span neatness of everything but the desk suggested the presence of a woman.

And there was, indeed, a woman—a girl in her mid-twenties with golden-blonde hair that hung down to her shoulders, and a figure that produced whistles from street-corner loungers. She came out of the kitchenette and ran to the front door as she heard Dark's key in the lock.

"You're still here," Dark said, as if he were witnessing a miracle.

"You silly goof!" she said. Her arms went around him and her lips found his.

She was a miracle, Dark told himself every hour of every day. Sharon had come into his life about a year ago. She had done some secretarial work for him, found out through the work about his crusade against Quadrant International, and, unbelievably, had fallen in love with him. He was old enough to be her father, and his crippled right hand could have made him repulsive to her, and yet here she was.

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She led him to one of the comfortable overstuffed armchairs, hurried into the kitchenette, and returned with a mug of steaming black coffee. She lit a cigarette and put it between his lips. Her cool fingers caressed his cheek.

"How did it go?" she asked. She had perched herself on the arm of his chair.

Dark's eyes clouded. "He saw me, thanks to Bob Maclyn in the State Department. He turned on his charm for me. But he didn't buy it."

"Oh, Jason!"

"He's going to that banquet tonight, intending to make a speech. I swear, I don't think he'll ever get to it."

"It's insane, Jason. Weren't you able to convince him that from what you know—?"

"Men headed for the stars believe they are immortal," Dark said, a bitter edge to his voice. He lifted his black-gloved plastic hand. "This shook him a little, but not enough."

"What's to be done?" Sharon asked.

"Nobody believes in terror or violence until after it's happened," Dark said. "I will go to the banquet—as a waiter. I've arranged it with Jerry Dodd, the security man at The Beaumont. I can hope I will see something, be one half-step ahead of a murder."

Sharon's fingers ran through his sandy hair. "Do you have to run risks yourself, Jason? You've warned him. Isn't that enough? If Maclyn at the State Department believes you, can't he have Childs protected? Why must you involve yourself, expose yourself to danger?"

Dark sipped his coffee. "If Childs is eliminated it will be a victory for Quadrant. One of the ways I can get at their vitals is to prevent this victory, any victory."

"Doesn't Childs have any protection at all? Foreign diplomats are protected by the police, the F.B.I., the Secret Service. What about our own people? Aren't they protected?"

"Oh, Childs has a bodyguard," Dark said. "A former F.B.I. agent who is supposed to know all the ins and outs of protecting a man in public. But I'm afraid they are guarding against the obvious—some crackpot with a gun, a bomb planted in Childs's car. It will be much more subtle than that, because Quadrant won't want it to look like a murder. An obvious murder would produce too thorough an inquiry.

"I told Childs he would probably die of a heart attack. He tells

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me he has the heart of a boy of twenty. He simply doesn't believe it. It's too far out for him to swallow." Dark allowed himself a mirthless chuckle. "But that's just the way it may come, through a swallow. In his food, in his wine."

"Then he's got to be made to see that!"

"I'll try to get Maclyn to work on him. The trouble is Maclyn only half believes me himself."

That conversation took place in the late morning.

Dark called Bob Maclyn, the half believer, in Washington. Dark was as grimly persuasive as he could be. Maclyn was flying up in the afternoon to attend the banquet. He agreed to meet with Dark and Childs at The Beaumont an hour before the dinner. They would have a final discussion about the possible danger. Meanwhile Maclyn agreed to call Childs and urge him to take the danger seriously.

"Do you know what the seating arrangements will be at the dinner?" Dark asked.

"Childs and I will be at the head table," Maclyn said, "along with some foreign dignitaries."

"Will you be sitting next to Childs?"

"Probably not. The foreign guests—"

"Could you arrange to sit next to him?"

"I suppose it could be managed without ruffling too many feathers," Maclyn said.

"Arrange it," Dark said.

Jason Dark had learned that in moments of pressure, the waiting time before a climax, a forty-minute nap could be relaxing and refreshing. After his talk with Maclyn, after a delicious luncheon prepared by Sharon, he went up to the second-floor bedroom and stretched out on the king-sized double bed. He was aware of the faint scent of Sharon's hair on the pillow. He fell asleep instantly—he had trained himself to sleep at any time the opportunity presented itself.

He woke, aware that Sharon was sitting on the edge of the bed, gently stroking his cheek.

"There is a man named Max Griffin here to see you. He says he's Dixon Child's bodyguard."

Dark sat up. "Good," he said. "Maybe Maclyn struck oil, persuaded Childs to pay attention."

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Max Griffin was a type that Dark recognized. The late J. Edgar Hoover had issued precise instructions about the appearance of his agents. They wore conservative suits, white shirts, dark ties, and short haircuts. Most of them had cold expressionless eyes. Max Griffin's eyes looked like two newly minted dimes. He was tall, broad-shouldered, a powerful man physically.

"I'm sorry to have missed you when you called on Mr. Childs this morning," he said, when Dark joined him. His voice was level, impersonal. Unlike his employer, he made no effort to charm. Nor had his tailor made any particular effort to conceal the fact that he was carrying a gun in a shoulder holster under his left arm.

"I'm glad you stopped by," Dark said, gesturing toward a chair.

Griffin sat down, his cold eyes taking in the room. A photographic survey, Dark thought. Every detail in the room would be remembered if remembering ever proved to be necessary.

"Mr. Maclyn seems to think you're not a crackpot," Griffin said. you've made a believer of him."

"But not of you or Childs?" Dark asked. He lit a cigarette, his eyes narrowed against the smoke.

"My job is to protect Childs," Griffin said. "I have to take any threat seriously, no matter how far-fetched."

"And my theory is far-fetched?"

Griffin shrugged. "You have no evidence."

Dark's lips tightened for a moment. "I was a cop for twenty-two years," he said. "I dealt with evidence all that time, Mr. Griffin. I found I was always dealing with crimes *after* they were committed. I retired from the force and became a private investigator so that I wouldn't have to deal with evidence that would make a case for a prosecutor. I was free to follow my intuition without waiting for solid evidence, hoping that way I could prevent crime, not solve it after the fact. I have an intuition about Childs. An attempt will be made to murder him tonight. I can't prove it, but I *know* it."

"Mr. Maclyn seems to think you're not a screwpot," Griffin said.

Dark's smile was thin. "Maclyn has had some experience with my intuitions." He didn't add "about Quadrant International."

"Let's take a look at the situation," Griffin said. "Childs is staying at The Beaumont. He won't have to leave the hotel to go to the banquet. He'll be taken to the dining room in a private elevator with only Maclyn and me with him. He won't be exposed to the

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public until he reaches the head table. Hotel security, under their man Dodd, will be spotted all around the room. Anybody who tries to pull a gun—"

"A waiter, standing right behind his chair?" Dark suggested.

"The waiters serving the head table are all long-time employees of the hotel, absolutely vouched for by Dodd. There is no outside help for this evening. Security, as far as a gunman is concerned, is as tight as it would be if we were protecting the President."

"It won't come that way," Dark said.

"You suggested poison in his food or wine," Griffin said. "It doesn't make sense, Dark. The food is served in the kitchen. A waiter brings in half a dozen plates at a time. There's no way for anyone to tell which plate will go to Mr. Childs. The staff has been warned. If anyone in the kitchen says that a particular plate is for Childs, the waiter will instantly report to Dodd. There is no way to tell in advance from which bottle the wine will be poured into Childs's glass. It just can't happen at the banquet."

"It will happen, unless we find a way to stop it," Dark said.

Griffin sounded impatient. "Someone will poison his food or wine after it's served? While he and Maclyn and I are watching?"

"I hope not," Dark said.

"I can assure you, Mr. Dark, it won't," Griffin said. "If you have any theory about some other way—?"

Dark shook his head slowly. "I wish I did."

"I think you can put your mind at rest," Griffin said. "Nothing is going to happen to Childs, with all due respect to your intuition."

At six o'clock that evening Jason Dark rang the doorbell of Dixon Childs's suite at the Beaumont Hotel. He was wearing a loose-fitting raincoat over a waiter's uniform, supplied to him by the hotel. Max Griffin opened the door and ushered him in. Dixon Childs and Maclyn received him. Both men were dressed in dinner jackets and black tie.

"You're still convinced there's danger, Mr. Dark?" Childs asked. He was smokeing one of his expensive cigars.

"More than ever convinced," Dark said.

"Griffin has explained to you how complete the security is."

"I would like to make it even more complete," Dark said. He glanced at his friend Maclyn, who had looked 35 years old for the last 15 years. He was a smiling salesman for America all over the world.

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"I'll buy you the best steak in New York, Bob," Dark said, "the best two steaks if you turn out to be that hungry—if you'll bypass the banquet."

Maclyn showed his surprise. "Why me, Jason? I'm not anyone's target."

"I don't mean to remove your elegant presence," Dark went on. "But whatever you are served, from soup to nuts, I want you to change plates with Mr. Childs—plates, cups, glasses—anything that is to be eaten or drunk. And having changed, you will eat or drink nothing that was served to Mr. Childs. You can plead a stomach upset if anyone asks about it."

"And if they ask why I am changing plates with Dixon?"

"He likes his meat rarer or better done, whatever the case may be."

"Griffin assures me there is no way the food or drink can be tampered with," Childs said. "Isn't this all pretty childish, Mr. Dark?"

Dark ignored the question. He was looking intently at his friend Maclyn. "I've never misled you before, have I, Bob?" he asked. "Humor me."

A cloud of worry passed over Maclyn's face. "All right, Jason," he said. "We'll play musical plates for you." He forced a smile. "That steak is going to cost you."

There were about 200 people in The Beaumont's special banquet hall when Childs, Maclyn, and Max Griffin entered through a back door and made their way to the head table. There were beautifully dressed women and an army of men in tuxedos. As Childs appeared, the guests rose from their seats and applauded. He was the guest of honor.

Dark, anonymous to most of them in his waiter's uniform, was standing by a tallish wiry man, also in black tie, who was Jerry Dodd, head of the hotel security force. Dark knew him as a highly efficient operator who, like himself, played his hunches.

"I'll be hovering behind the head table," Dark said. "If you see anyone at all in that area who doesn't belong to your staff, signal me."

"I'll get him," Dodd said.

"Leave him to me," Dark said. "Because there is more to it than just catching him. He's going to have to talk, Jerry, and the way to make him talk may not be quite legal."

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The dinner began. The steady hum of voices, the occasional bursts of laughter, rose over the background of a string quartet playing soft music on a stand at the rear of the room. It was a gay, elegant occasion.

Dark watched the byplay at the head table. Waiters served the food and poured the wine. On every occasion Childs and Maclyn exchanged plates and glasses. When Maclyn didn't eat, a waiter inquired solicitously. Maclyn made some excuse. A few yards away Max Griffin watched intently, his right hand slipped under his dinner jacket toward the holstered gun he was wearing. Around the room Dark saw at least a dozen hotel-security people and half a dozen others whom he spotted as police. As promised, the security was tight.

The dinner progressed to dessert and coffee. It was at that point that a waiter made his way along the back of the head table, putting a cellophane-wrapped cigar, taken from a cedar box, beside each diner. From across the way Dark saw Jerry Dodd raise his arm in a signal.

All anyone saw was a short square waiter suddenly move up beside Dixon Childs, apparently to sweep crumbs away from the diplomat's place. In the process he awkwardly swept Childs's cigar onto the floor.

"That was very clumsy of me, sir," Dark said. And then in a tense whisper. *"Don't smoke any cigar, not even your own!"*

Childs looked startled but he managed to simply nod and go on with a conversation with the guest at his left.

Dark walked briskly out into the service area, down a corridor to a door marked SERVICE LOCKERS. He opened the door and went in. The waiter who had passed the cigars was standing by an open locker, hurriedly changing out of his waiter's uniform into street clothes. He turned, with a startled look, as Dark entered. Seeing another waiter he smiled, a white-toothed smile, and went on dressing.

"Cigar?" Dark asked cheerfully, holding out the cellophane-wrapped cigar he'd swept away from Childs's place.

"No, thank you very much," the man said.

"Oh, but I want you to try this one," Dark said. "It's the one you left at Mr. Childs's place. I notice a little mark on the wrapper, put there to make sure you didn't make a mistake."

"I don't know what you're talking about!" the man said, his eyes suddenly wide with fright.

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"If you smoke this I'll know you are not a willing killer, even if it kills you," Dark said. "If you want to live, I suggest you tell me who hired you for the job."

"No! Please—"

The locker-room door opened and Dark, turning his head, saw Max Griffin. The big bodyguard had drawn his gun and it was aimed in the general direction of Dark and the waiter.

"Go!" Griffin said. "Get out of here fast!"

The waiter gave a little cry of relief and ran.

"And now, Mr. Dark, you will hand over that cigar," Griffin said.

"It's evidence," Dark said.

"I don't want to have to kill you here," Griffin said, "but if you don't hand over that cigar—"

"You will take me somewhere else and kill me, is that it?"

"Hands against the wall. Spread your legs," Griffin ordered. He was very close. A child couldn't miss at that distance.

Dark turned, raised his hands and placed them against the wall. He was holding the cigar in his left hand, the good hand. He spread his legs, and Griffin gave him a very professional frisking. Then the cigar was snatched out of Dark's hand.

"You can turn around now," Griffin said.

Dark turned, his hands still raised above his head. Griffin's mouth was twisted in a grim smile.

"Didn't your intuition tell you that you wouldn't be allowed to interfere in this situation, Dark?" he asked.

"My intuition told me to expect you," Dark said. "May I lower my hands?"

"Go ahead."

Dark lowered his left hand, slowly, but his right, the one in the black glove, moved liked lightning. It caught Griffin on his gun arm and there was a sound like splintering wood. Griffin screamed, staggered back, the gun slithering away across the floor. The black-gloved hand rose and came down again on Griffin's head. The bodyguard spun around and fell flat on his face on the cement floor.

Dark, breathing hard, stood quite still, looking at him. Then he bent down and took the cellophane-wrapped cigar out of Griffin's pocket.

At that moment the door burst open and Jerry Dodd, the hotel-security man, charged in, gun drawn.

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"Did you get that waiter?" Dark asked.

"Got him," Dodd said. He knelt down beside Griffin. Then he looked up at Dark. "For God's sake, what did you hit him with? He's out cold."

Dark moved over toward a locker and opened it. Inside was his raincoat. He pulled up his right sleeve and began to unfasten the black-gloved hand from the harness on his forearm.

"When this happened to me," he said, "I had wild, hysterical ideas at first. They had done this to me, and I would turn it into a weapon to use against someone, I thought. I had a duplicate hand made, one of cast-iron. It seemed childish later on, but tonight I thought it might come in handy."

He reached in the pocket of his raincoat and replaced the iron hand with the lightweight plastic one he normally wore.

"I realize," Maclyn said, as Dark let him into the 40th Street apartment, "that you want to change out of that waiter's suit before you take me to eat somewhere. But I warn you, I'm starving—for food and for facts."

"Patience," Dark said. He raised his head, like an old hound sniffing the breeze for a trail. Then he smiled. "The time has come."

It was then that Maclyn noticed a table for two set by the windows. It was then that a lovely blonde girl came out of the kitchenette carrying a huge sizzling steak on a silver platter. It was then that Maclyn saw the salad in a wooden bowl, the loaf of French bread, the champagne in an ice bucket.

"You want the facts before you eat?" Dark asked.

Dark crossed to the table, stopping on the way to kiss Sharon's cheek. "Intuition," he said to Maclyn. "I began to suspect Griffin from the start. He wanted me to tell him what was going to happen. He never suggested any possibilities himself. I had the feeling that as he listened to me he was pleased. I hadn't mentioned the method for getting Childs that was planned. He knew—he thought he knew—exactly what we were guarding against. All that mumbo-jumbo about changing plates convinced him that's what we were watching for. Behind the scenes, which Griffin could see, Dodd was having the plates and drinks intended for Childs whisked away. I let it slip we had a chemist waiting to check everything. Our Mr. Griffin was Cheshire-cat happy."

"And then the waiter with the cigars appeared," Maclyn said.

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Dark nodded. "The cigar, as a method, had occurred to me early. I'd noticed that Childs was a heavy smoker of expensive cigars. The poisoned cigar is an old C.I.A. trick, according to the media."

"But it could have been so much simpler," Maclyn said. "A poisoned cigar slipped into his own humidor."

"I think not," Dark said. "An autopsy might reveal how he died, and then the people close to Childs would all be suspect, including our Mr. Griffin. At the banquet there would be a couple of hundred suspects, the least of them Max Griffin, Childs's own bodyguard."

"It will be a long time before Griffin will be able to talk," Maclyn said. "You really did him in."

Dark smiled. "The velvet hand in the iron glove."

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

LOVE IN GLOOM;
or, THE KISS OF DEATH

by ELEANOR F. HULL

John Jericho's full of allure
For a gal who likes lovers mature.
But if she is smart
She'll hang onto her heart,
For his love's a death warrant for sure!

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a *NEW* Captain Leopold story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Captain Leopold has a penchant for "impossible crimes." Perhaps they come his way because he secretly likes them—they are baffling and frustrating, and they test his innermost resources. And this one was a beaut—it challenged his shrewdest jigsawing.

How can a man be murdered in his own car, strangled by a cord in the midst of a traffic jam, with no one else in the car and no one else seen entering or leaving the car? It couldn't have been suicide—but then how can a dead man drive a car? As Captain Leopold put it: "It was one hell of a case!" . . .

CAPTAIN LEOPOLD AND THE IMPOSSIBLE MURDER

by EDWARD D. HOCH

"Automobiles!" Leopold was to remark long after it was over. "I never had a case involving so many different automobiles! The crime, the clue, the capture, the confession—each involved a different car. There was an auto driven by a dead man, and another that hadn't been driven by anyone in thirty years. It was one hell of a case!"

It began at dusk on a November afternoon when Leopold's own car was in the garage for some minor repair work. Lieutenant Fletcher had offered him a ride home, and they'd chosen the Eastern Avenue route to avoid the rush-hour traffic on the expressway. But the usually deserted street was jammed with cars, and as they approached a familiar curve by an embankment Fletcher spotted some trouble ahead.

"Looks like we gotta go to work, Captain. One driver's out of his car. It could be a fight."

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"All right," Leopold sighed. "I wasn't hungry anyway. Turn on your flasher."

They left the car and walked up to the scene of the trouble. A sandy-haired young man, standing at the open door of a late-model hatchback was gesturing wildly to a motorist in the next car. "What's the trouble here?" Fletcher asked. "We're police." Leopold followed behind him, feeling just a bit like a traffic cop.

The young man turned in obvious agitation. "I think this driver is dead!"

Fletcher bent inside the car to feel for a pulse. "What happened?"

"We were caught in this traffic jam for like twenty minutes, just inching along. Finally, when it began to clear up and move, he just sat there ahead of me. I got out of my car after honking a few times, to see what the trouble was. God, I think he's dead!"

Fletcher straightened up and glanced at Leopold. "I'll radio for an ambulance."

Leopold lowered his voice. "Is he—?"

"Dead as he'll ever be, Captain."

"Heart attack?"

Fletcher shook his head. "He's got a cord wrapped around his neck. Somebody strangled him."

Leopold's eyes widened. "In the middle of a traffic jam?"

"You figure it out, Captain."

The young man's name was Sam Prowdy, and he told a straightforward story. He was a plumber, employed by a building contractor, and he'd been on his way home from work along with everyone else when an accident on the expressway forced them into a traffic jam on Eastern Avenue. He'd noticed nothing unusual about the little green car ahead of him, and certainly hadn't seen anyone leave it in the middle of the traffic jam.

"Sure, I'd have noticed," he insisted back in Leopold's office. "Somebody gets out of a car ahead of you, you notice it, don't you?"

"It was just getting dark," Leopold pointed out. "You could have missed it."

"I didn't miss a thing! The guy was alone in the car, and he was driving it. Then we were stuck for about five minutes and he stopped moving. I honked and got out to check on him and that's when you guys came up."

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"Did you know the dead man?" Leopold asked.

"Hell, no! I still don't know him. Who was he?"

"His name was Vincent Conners. Thirty-two years old, with a wife and two children in the suburbs. Worked as a stockbroker with Bland and Burnett."

"Never heard of him!"

"All right," Leopold said with a sigh. "We'll probably be contacting you again, but you can go now."

When he was alone with Fletcher he said, "There was nothing to hold him on. A woman in the next car confirmed that he'd just opened the door of Conners's auto when we arrived. He couldn't have done it. Besides, Conners had already been dead anywhere up to a half hour according to the preliminary medical report."

Fletcher snorted. "Where does that leave us? With a dead man driving a car around town?"

"I don't know," Leopold admitted. "But I guess we have to talk to Mrs. Conners."

The home was in a suburb touching Long Island Sound, the sort of area in which local stockbrokers were expected to live. Lights burned in every window, and a neighbor opened the door as Leopold and Fletcher approached. "Mrs. Connors is in the kitchen," the woman said. "The children are over at my house."

Leopold nodded and went into the brightly lit kitchen. A few others, neighbors and relatives, stepped aside to let him pass. It was a gloomy setting for all its brightness, and the heavy atmosphere was one he'd encountered too many times before. Sudden violent death had a way of settling over lives like a somber fog.

Linda Conners was small and fragile-looking, with long dark hair and high cheekbones. Only one man chose to remain in the kitchen while Leopold spoke to her, and that was one of her husband's employers, Frank Bland. He looked like a stockbroker too. He might have been another Conners, ten years older and forty pounds heavier. "She's had a great shock," he explained to Leopold. "They were very close."

"I'm sure they were. Mrs. Conners, I hate to bother you at a time like this, but I know you want to help in finding your husband's killer."

She took a sip of coffee and gazed up at him with pale eyes. "There's nothing I can tell you. No one had a reason for killing Vince. Everyone liked him."

"It must have been a car thief," Frank Bland suggested. "Some-

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one Vince caught in the vehicle, who strangled him from behind."

"We have a bit of a problem because no one was seen leaving the vehicle," Leopold said. "Yet your husband couldn't have driven it after he was strangled." Even as he spoke the words, he was aware of how incongruous this suburban kitchen setting was with talk of an impossible crime.

"He once told me he'd probably die in his car, the way his father had."

"You needn't get into all that, Linda," Frank Bland cautioned. "The Captain is only investigating this case."

But Leopold was interested. "What happened to Vince's father?"

She tried to take another sip of coffee but the cup was empty. Bland refilled it from a nearby pot. "Well, he was shot in a hunting accident. Thirty years ago."

"What did that have to do with a car?"

"He bled to death on the back seat, while he was being rushed back to town. The car belonged to one of Vince's aunts, and they never used it again. They've still got it, up on blocks in their garage."

"You say this happened thirty years ago?"

"Yes."

"Then your husband would have been around two years old."

"Yes."

"Is his mother still living?"

"She remarried, moved out West somewhere. He never sees—saw her."

"Is this aunt still alive?"

"Oh, yes. There are two of them. They live together in the family homestead."

"They're his closest kin in this area?"

"*I'm* his closest kin. And the children."

"Of course," Leopold corrected himself. "I meant besides you."

She nodded. "Yes, Aunt Gert and Aunt Flag."

"Aunt Flag?"

"That's what they've always called her."

"Perhaps you'd better give me their address."

"Certainly. Frank, could you hand me a piece of paper?"

She wrote out the address and handed it to Leopold. "I hope you find the killer," she said quietly.

When they were outside, Fletcher asked, "We going over to see the aunts now, Captain?"

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Leopold looked at his watch. It was already after ten. "No, it's a bit late to be upsetting a couple of old ladies. We'll see them in the morning."

Connie Trent was in the office before Leopold, checking out a shooting at an all-night restaurant. "I heard about last evening," she told Leopold. "You and Fletcher just manage to drop right into them, don't you?"

Leopold nodded. "Can't even get home at night without finding a murder on the road. How about it? Any ideas how a man can be strangled to death in a car in the middle of a traffic jam? While he's alone?"

She thought for a moment. "If the window was open someone could have lassoed him."

"The window was only open a couple of inches, and none of the other drivers saw anything like a lasso. But thanks anyway."

"Any time," she said with a smile, and went back to typing her report.

Leopold and Fletcher reached the Conners homestead just after eleven and went up the crumbling sidewalk to the front door. The woman who answered was not as elderly as they'd expected, but she moved slowly, with a hint of some hidden disability.

"You'd be police," she said without looking at Leopold's identification. "My sister and I have been expecting you, ever since we heard about poor Vincent. Come in—I'm Gert Conners."

"We're sorry to bother you like this, Miss Conners. But outside of his wife and children you're the closest kin. We don't mind admitting we're baffled as to a possible motive."

Gert Conners pushed back a stray wisp of gray hair. "They said on the news he probably surprised a car thief."

"Well, that's one theory. But it doesn't cover all the facts."

She'd led them into a musty sitting room with lace curtains on the windows. A second gray-haired woman was seated in a rocking chair, busily knitting something long and blue. She smiled as they entered but didn't rise. "This is Aunt Flag," Gert Conners said.

Aunt Flag nodded as Leopold and Fletcher introduced themselves. "I know you'll find out who killed our nephew," she said. "He was a good lad. Always came to see us."

Aunt Flag was perhaps ten years older than Aunt Gert, and obviously feeble. "You have an unusual name," Leopold commented.

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"It's really Flagula, but that's a terrible name for a person. I've been called Flag all my life. We were always Aunt Flag and Aunt Gert to Vincent."

Leopold had taken a seat at one end of the claw-footed couch, and Fletcher gently lowered himself into position at the other end. "Do either of you ladies know any reason why Vincent might have been murdered? Any troubles, any enemies? Perhaps a feud from long ago?"

"There was never anything like that," Aunt Flag assured them. "He was always very honest and open, even as a child. We saw a great deal of him as a child, because of course his father died when he was only two."

"That would be your brother?"

Aunt Gert nodded. "Our brother George—our only brother."

"Just how did George die?"

There might have been a look that passed between the sisters before Aunt Gert replied. "It was a hunting accident, one of those foolish things. They were out shooting pheasants and George dropped his shotgun somehow. It went off and hit him in the stomach. His wife helped him back to the car and put him on the rear seat. They hurried back to town as fast as they could, but poor George was dead by the time they reached the hospital. He'd bled to death on the back seat of the car."

"It was your car?" Leopold prompted her.

Aunt Gert frowned. "Who told you that? No, actually it was Aunt Flag's car. It was right after the war and cars were still scarce. George didn't have one of his own, so he borrowed it."

"We never used it again," Aunt Flag said. "It's back in the garage."

So both father and son had died violent deaths in automobiles, separated in time by 30 years. Leopold wondered about it, wondered what effect the father's death might have had on the son. "Thank you," he said. "You've been very helpful."

Aunt Gert walked outside with them, kicking a stone from the crumbling walk. "I really must get this fixed," she said.

"Is Aunt Flag confined to her chair?" Leopold asked.

"Oh, she gets around but she's very feeble since her stroke. I do all the shopping and I take care of her."

"That must be hard on you."

"She's my sister."

"Of course." Leopold looked up at the dappled sky, wondering if

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the sun would break through. "When did you last see your nephew alive, Miss Conners?"

"Oh, it must have been about a week ago."

"When he came to visit you, did he ever go out to the garage and look at that car his father died in?"

"Why would you ask a question like that? Of course not! He came to see us, not to stir up memories of the past."

"Did his wife come with him last week?"

Aunt Gert avoided Leopold's eyes. "Not last week, no."

"But she did come sometimes?"

"Not often. She has no use for old people."

"You're not old," Leopold reassured her, climbing into his car while Fletcher got behind the wheel.

"Thank you. You're very kind."

"Just one other question. Who was with your brother George the day of his hunting accident?"

"With him? No one was with him, only his wife. There were just the two of them out there when it happened."

It was Connie who tracked down the information and brought it to Leopold's office later in the day. "I ran up a small fortune in long-distance phone calls for this," she said. "I hope it's worth it."

"If it helps solve this damned case it's worth it. What have you got, Connie?"

"George Conners served in the European Theater of Operations during World War Two, and took part in the D-day invasion of Normandy. He met and married a British girl named Jean Hemmings. Apparently it was a rush marriage—their only child Vincent was born two months later, near the end of 1944. Conners and his wife returned to America in the spring of '45, when the European war ended. It was the fall of 1946 when he was killed in the hunting accident, just after Vincent's second birthday."

Leopold interrupted. "Was there any sort of police investigation at the time?"

"Just routine, apparently. Anyway, the widow Jean remarried soon after—within a year—to a car salesman here in town. I don't think Vincent was ever close to his mother and stepfather. When he was eighteen he went off to college and they moved out West. Except for occasional brief visits he never lived with them again."

Leopold grunted and stared out the window. "What are you thinking, Captain?" Fletcher asked. "That his wife shot him?"

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"Like in that Ernest Hemingway story," Connie said. "The one about Macomber."

"She shot him and married another man," Leopold said quietly. "And thirty years later his son dies in another car. Did his wife kill him too, in order to marry another man?"

Fletcher snapped his fingers. "That guy Frank Bland! I thought he was being awfully chummy for an employer. Do you think—?"

"Check on him, Fletcher. Talk to Conners' coworkers. See if there was any gossip around the office."

"But the two crimes are entirely different," Connie pointed out. "Knowing about the first one doesn't help us in the least toward solving the second one. How could they possibly be connected?"

"If Vincent suspected his father was murdered all those years ago—suspected it through something he overheard or half remembered—he might have mentioned it to his wife. That might have planted the idea in her mind."

"It's all guesswork," Connie said.

Leopold agreed. "But in this case we've got nothing to go on but guesswork."

Both Connie and Fletcher had duties involving other cases, and after Fletcher's report on Frank Bland the following day the investigation was left pretty much in Leopold's hands. Fletcher hadn't come up with anything concrete about Bland. He was divorced, and he occasionally dined at the Conners' home—but this could have been nothing more suspicious than the time-honored custom of having the boss to dinner.

With the Conners funeral only a day away, the medical examiner still had not ruled on the cause of death. Speaking with Leopold, he was inclined to rule it a suicide, simply because "It couldn't be murder, could it, Captain?"

To which Leopold replied, "Doc, did you ever hear of anybody committing suicide by strangling himself with a cord while driving in a traffic jam?"

"I guess not," the medical examiner agreed.

Leopold picked up the murder weapon and examined it once more. It was a loop of knotted cord that they'd had to cut away from the dead man's neck. It fit the most likely newspaper theory of the case—that a car thief had been trapped in the back seat by Conners' unexpected return and had strangled Conners from the rear.

But that left a big question mark.

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If the thief left the car immediately, how did a dead man drive the automobile for nearly a half hour? And if the killer was still in the car when it was caught in the traffic jam, how did he leave it without being seen?

It was as close to an absolute impossibility as anything Leopold had ever encountered.

So he went back to the medical examiner again. "Doc, can't you be more precise as to the time of death?"

"We're talking about minutes here, Captain. Remember it was nearly an hour after you found him before I saw the body. I'd be inclined to say he died twenty to thirty minutes before you found him, but if you say that's impossible I'll cut it to a shorter period."

Leopold accepted that and went in search of a new lead. In the police garage where the murder car was impounded he had a mechanic sit in the front seat while he sat in the back and went through the motions of strangling the mechanic. But that didn't satisfy him. It was all wrong. Finally he decided to follow up Fletcher's investigation by calling on the dead man's employer.

Frank Bland greeted him with a wan smile. "Still at it, Captain?"

"Still at it." He glanced through the glass wall of the office at the lighted display board of noon stock quotations. "I imagine this is a profitable business."

The stout man shifted uneasily. "We have our good years."

"I mean, Vincent made a comfortable living here."

"The salary and commissions are good, and we have a generous life-insurance program which will benefit his widow. He had no reason to complain."

Leopold chose his words carefully. "He gave no hint of anything wrong on the day he was killed?"

"Nothing. He left early, right after the market closed. I was surprised he wasn't home long before he was killed. But there was nothing else unusual."

"And you say his wife would benefit from the insurance?"

Frank Bland half rose from his chair. "Surely you're not implying that Linda had anything to do with this terrible thing!"

"No, no—don't misunderstand me. I was only thinking that Conners was well off financially. I visited his aunts and they would seem to be part of a monied family. And you've confirmed that Conners had a good income here. Of course if his wife divorced him she'd lose most of that."

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"I can assure you Linda was happily married. I saw a great deal of them and they were very close."

"Were there any tensions among his fellow workers? Any clients he steered onto a bum stock?"

Frank Bland sighed. "I thought your Lieutenant Fletcher had been all over this matter. As I told him, I can contribute nothing to the investigation."

"All right," Leopold said. "One more question and I'll be on my way. Did Vincent Conners ever mention his aunts to you? Or the hunting accident that took his father's life?"

"Nothing was ever said about the accident. He may have mentioned his aunts in passing once or twice. I remember asking him one time if he couldn't bring them in as clients."

Leopold rose to leave. "Thank you, Mr. Bland. I hope I don't have to trouble you again."

He got his car out of the parking lot across the street and went back to visit the aunts. On the way he thought about Bland's denial that Vincent had mentioned the hunting accident. Bland had seemed to know about it earlier, and that indicated he'd heard it from Linda.

It was one of those sunny November days when it seemed as if summer was staging a comeback, and he found Aunt Gert trimming rosebushes in the side yard of the house. "So it's you again," she said by way of greeting.

"It's me again. I don't mean to interrupt your work."

She straightened from her task, brushing some loose soil from the knees of her slacks. "The garden takes a great deal of time. Aunt Flag used to help me with it when she was able to."

"I'll try not to take up too much of your time," Leopold said. "But we've come up against a dead end in trying to trace Vince's mother and notify her of his death. Do you have any idea at all where she might have moved out West?"

Aunt Gert shook her head. "We've lost all track of her. I know for a time they were in California, but then Vince told us once his mother had moved to New Mexico. He never said where, though. Doesn't Linda have an address?"

"She claims not. We've asked the police to check the last-known address in Los Angeles."

"It was too bad about Vince and his mother. But it was his stepfather's fault they drifted apart. He never took to the lad."

"I was wondering, Miss Conners—as long as I'm out here again,

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do you think I could have a look at that old car in your garage? I'm something of an antique-car buff—"

"You'd hardly call it an antique," she said. "It's a 1941 Packard, made just before the war."

"Could I see it anyway?"

She hesitated just a moment. "I'll get the key to the garage."

When she opened the garage it gave off a musty odor even more overpowering than the one in the house. It was a cramped one-car garage, separated from the house, as all garages had been back in Leopold's youth. The car was a dull shade of green. Its tires had been removed at some time in the distant past and its axles rested on concrete blocks.

"It seems in good condition," Leopold observed. "You could probably still drive it."

"Never had a license. Never wanted one."

There was no overhead light, but the sunlight coming through the side window was strong enough for him to study the vehicle. He opened the rear door and looked at the back seat, where Vincent Conners' father had bled to death 30 years ago. There were two large bloodstains on the upholstery, about a foot apart. The one on the left was slightly larger.

"You should have sold the car," Leopold suggested. "It does no good remembering."

"He was our brother. Some things have to be remembered."

"Did he really shoot himself, Miss Conners?"

"She said so."

"What do *you* think?"

She was silent for a long time, staring out the driveway at a playful dog across the quiet street. Finally Gert Conners said, very softly, as if it was the first time her tongue had dared give voice to the words, "I think she killed him."

Leopold took a deep breath. The air in the garage seemed suddenly even closer. "And Vincent? Your nephew?"

She looked up at him, puzzled. "How could—?"

There was a noise from the house, a tapping on the rear window. They could see Aunt Flag motioning. "She wants me," Aunt Gert said. "I must go now."

He waited while she locked the garage door, then said goodbye and went back to his car.

Two deaths, with 30 years between. Different, and yet somehow the same.

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That afternoon he told Fletcher to put a tail on Linda Conners. "The funeral is tomorrow morning. For the next few days I want to know where she goes and whom she sees."

Oddly enough, Linda Conners phoned Leopold less than an hour after he'd issued his order. Her voice was firm and she seemed in good control of herself. "Captain, I'm calling from the funeral parlor. I understand you've been trying to locate Vince's mother."

"That's right, Mrs. Conners."

"I've found an address that may be her current one. I'll read it to you."

Leopold copied down a street address in Santa Fe, New Mexico. "Do you want to try calling her, Mrs. Conners, or should we contact her about her son's death?"

"I wish you would, Captain. I've only met the woman twice in my life."

"We'll take care of it. Thank you for the address, Mrs. Conners."

Connie was assigned the task of informing Vincent Conners' mother of her son's death. It was not until the following morning, at about the time of the funeral, that Connie managed to reach the woman. "They certainly weren't close," she reported back to Leopold. "She expressed regrets, but that was all. I might have been reporting the death of a distant cousin instead of her only son."

"She has a new life for herself now," Leopold said. "She doesn't want to be reminded of Vincent Conners, or of his father." He was remembering the car in the garage, with its bloodstained back seat—the car that hadn't been driven for 30 years.

"Fletcher says you've put a tail on Linda Conners."

"That's right. I want to know if she sees Frank Bland."

"What will that prove, if we still don't know how Vincent was killed?"

"If we know who, we'll figure out how."

But the two cases—the old one and the new one—were still intertwined in Leopold's mind, and he couldn't help feeling that the answer somehow rested on that bloodstained back seat.

Nothing happened for two days.

Vincent Conners was buried, and Linda Conners cried. Frank Bland attended the funeral and put his arm around the shoulders of the grieving widow.

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But you can't arrest a man for doing that.

Finally Leopold telephoned Vincent Conners' mother in Santa Fe. It was late on Friday, and the autumn sun had already set.

Her name had changed from Jean Hemmings to Jean Conners to Jean Quinlan, but she still retained her British accent. After Leopold had identified himself, she asked. "Is this more about my son's death?"

"Not exactly, Mrs. Quinlan. Actually, it's about your husband's death."

"That was thirty years ago!"

"Yes."

"Well, what about it?"

"I realize that the shooting was an accident, and we're not attempting to reopen the case, but I have to ask you one question. It'll help us a great deal with the investigation of your son's killing."

"What is it?"

"Mrs. Quinlan, did you shoot your husband?"

"Shoot him? Of course I didn't shoot him! My God, I loved him—he died in my arms!"

"Yes," Leopold said, "that's exactly what I suspected." And then he asked her one more question, although he already knew the answer to that one too.

As he hung up the telephone, Fletcher hurried into the office. "She's moving, Captain. She left the house by a back door and went through the yards to the next street. Someone picked her up there in a car."

Leopold was on his feet. "Damn! Vincent's hardly cold in his grave. Let's go!"

The unmarked car that was following Linda Conners was put into contact with Leopold's vehicle. "They're heading south on Grand Street, Captain—toward the Sound," the radio crackled.

"Finding them together won't convict anybody of murder," Fletcher reminded Leopold.

"No, but if we show up unexpectedly Bland might panic. If she's sneaking around to meet him, she's got something to hide."

The car had parked for a time on a dark street near the water, but neither of them emerged. And by the time the radio had directed Leopold to the spot they'd started up again.

"We're close to them," Fletcher said.

"Don't let them spot the car. She might remember it."

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The radio crackled into life again. "They seem to be just driving around, Captain. Should I keep with them?"

"Keep with them. Where are you now?"

"Just turning back onto Grand, at Maple."

"We're only four blocks away. Are they headed north again?"

"Right."

"We'll join a few blocks up."

Fletcher was driving Leopold's car, and he turned onto Grand Avenue a block and a half behind the red tail-lights of their quarry. "Looks like they're heading back toward her neighborhood," Fletcher remarked.

The car turned off Grand and before long Leopold could see that Fletcher was correct. He was taking her back home. If it had been a lovers' meeting it was a brief one.

"He's stopping a block from the house," Fletcher said. "Must be letting her out."

The door on the passenger side opened and Linda Conners appeared. She bent down for a final goodbye and then slammed the door shut. Something gnawed at Leopold's memory as he watched.

Then he had it.

"That car, Fletcher! That car!"

"What is it, Captain?"

"Head him off! Don't let him get away!"

Fletcher cut across the lawn of a corner house to beat the car around a corner, then slammed on the brakes to block the narrow street. The other car screeched to a halt as the driver hit his brakes. Then his door came open and he tumbled out, trying to run.

Leopold and Fletcher were on him then, with guns drawn.

It wasn't Frank Bland.

It was the man who had found the body—Sam Prowdy.

Leopold pulled the car up before the Conners homestead the following morning and tapped lightly on the horn. Aunt Gert looked up from her task of tying the bushes in burlap, recognized him, and walked over.

"My, you're getting to be a regular visitor here!"

Leopold smiled. "Could you get in the car for a minute, Miss Conners? Then we can stay warm while we talk."

"I saw in the papers that you caught the man who killed Vincent," she said, opening the door and sliding into the front seat

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next to him. "But I still don't understand it all."

"His name is Sam Prowdy," Leopold explained, "and he's been Linda Conners' lover for some time. They killed her husband for a large insurance policy on his life. It's the oldest sort of crime, but at first we didn't recognize it for what it was. A bizarre chain of circumstances made it look like an impossible crime.

"You see, Prowdy strangled Vincent with a cord in the Conners garage, and then put him behind the wheel of his car. He sat next to the dead man and drove over to Eastern Avenue with Linda following in his auto. Then they stopped for a minute while he tied the steering wheel of Vincent's car and got back into his own vehicle. Linda walked over a few blocks and caught a bus. Then Prowdy simply started pushing the car with Vincent's body in it down the straight road—pushing Vincent's car with his own car."

"And nobody noticed it?"

"Well, it was getting dark. And that portion of Eastern Avenue is rarely traveled since the expressway opened parallel to it. Prowdy's plan was to pick up speed until he reached the point where Eastern Avenue curves to the left, then take the curve with his car while Vincent's went straight ahead and through the guard rail. They were hoping Vincent's car would burst into flames going down the hill, burning both the cord on the steering wheel and the one around your nephew's neck. Whether they could have covered up the signs of murder completely is doubtful, but they might have pulled it off. What they didn't expect, though, was the traffic jam."

"It was caused by an accident?"

Leopold nodded. "An expressway accident that shifted all the rush-hour traffic over to Eastern Avenue. Sam Prowdy hadn't figured on that, of course. The traffic was bumper to bumper, with no chance for him to pick up speed or push Vincent's car through the guard rail unobserved. It was easy for him to keep nudging the other car along on a straight road, but with the curve coming up he knew he had to do something else.

"So he simply stopped pushing it, honked his horn, and got out in all innocence to see what the trouble was. When he opened the car door he had time to unknot the rope from the steering wheel and hide it under his coat in the near-darkness, but we arrived before he could get the rope off the throat. He should have removed that after he killed Conners, of course, but murderers don't always think of everything."

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"And you figured all this out?"

Leopold smiled. "I wish I could take credit for it. I never bought the newspaper theory of a back-seat strangler, because late-model cars have a head-rest making it extremely difficult to strangle someone from behind and knot the cord around his neck. After I discounted a car thief as the killer I naturally shifted focus to Linda. We followed her when she met a man, but it wasn't till I finally recognized Prowdy's car that the whole method tumbled into place in my mind."

"I appreciate your coming out here to tell me about it," Gert Conners said.

"To be honest, that wasn't the only reason I came. It's been stuck in my mind all along that there was some connection between the deaths of Vincent Conners and his father."

"That was a long time ago," she reminded him.

"Of course. And obviously the same person couldn't have been responsible for both deaths."

"Responsible? Nobody was responsible for my brother's death. He shot himself."

"It's difficult to shoot yourself in the stomach with a shotgun, even when dropping it—though of course it could have happened that way. But then I looked at the car and saw those bloodstains, and they told a different story."

"What do you mean?"

"There were *two* bloodstains, Miss Conners, on the back seat of that car. Next to each other, but separated by about a foot."

"There might have been a blanket under him."

Leopold shook his head. "On the long trip back to town that much blood would have soaked through the blanket. He was lying on the back seat, so if the blood simply trickled down his sides from the wound the stains would have been at the front edge and the back of the seat, not side by side."

"Then how do you explain it?"

"My first thought was that he was held in someone's arms during the car trip, that he bled to death in someone's lap. That would explain the twin stains—on either side of the seated person. I finally located his widow yesterday and spoke to her on the phone. She confirmed that George died in her arms."

"As I remember," Aunt Gert said, "that's the way it happened."

"But if they were out there alone, and he died in her arms on the way back into town, *who was driving the car?*"

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She was silent.

"They weren't alone, Miss Conners. They couldn't have been. And that means you lied about it when you said they were. If your brother really shot himself—or even if his wife shot him—there would be no reason to lie."

"All right," Gert Conners said very quietly. "I did it. I shot him. I was aiming at his wife, and I hit George instead."

In one of the trees overhead two squirrels were hard at work on a winter nest of leaves. Leopold watched them and wished he was in some other line of work. He turned to her and said, "The lies never cease, do they? Thirty years of it and the lies never cease."

"What do you mean?"

"The other person out hunting that day, the one who shot your brother, was obviously the one who drove the car back to town while Jean Conners held her dying husband in the back seat. And you told me you never had a driver's license."

"I—"

"It was Aunt Flag who shot him, wasn't it? It was Aunt Flag you've been protecting for thirty years. It was her car, after all, and she was driving it that day. That was why she put it up on blocks and never drove it again. No use denying it—Jean told me on the phone that Flag was there, though she never knew exactly how the shooting happened."

Gert Conners was sobbing now. "God, it's like a family curse! First George and now Vincent! I asked Flag what happened that day and she told me. It was Jean she was trying to kill, of course—Jean who even then was cheating on our brother by having a sordid little affair with that man she later married. Flag said she deserved to die. But somehow George stepped in front of the gun. Perhaps he knew what was in Flag's mind."

Leopold glanced toward the house. "She's tapping on the window again. You'd better go in."

"You won't take her away, will you? Lock her up?"

"She needs someone to watch her, to confine her and make certain she never harms another person."

"She's already got that," Gert Conners said. "I've been doing it for thirty years." She brushed away the tears.

Leopold watched her get out of the car.

"Yes," he said, "I suppose you have."

He sat there for a long time, thinking about life and death.

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